

TURNABOUT: Sorry, Marty, but Idaho water is no bargaining chip for dam removal

By NORM SEMANKO

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In his May 2 editorial, Marty Trillhaase states that the Snake River dams are a headache for people in other parts of Idaho. He also suggests that the dams are somehow responsible for Idaho's contributions toward flow augmentation and have resulted in irrigated farmland being dried up. He is wrong on both counts.

This may come as a surprise to Trillhaase, but Idaho is one state. It is and should be united in protecting the dams and other vital infrastructure that provides benefits to residents and businesses in our state. That is inconvenient for the litigating environmental groups who prefer that the dams be removed. But it makes perfect sense to the rest of us. That is why the Idaho Water Users Association — which includes all of the large irrigation districts and canal companies in southern and eastern Idaho — has resolved that it “is opposed to removal of any of the lower Snake and Columbia River dams.” Instead of imagining a world where the dams no longer exist, we are better served by making sure that the dams and fish can coexist. Significant strides in this direction continue to be made everyday. In the 1990s, we were told that the salmon were entering an “extinction vortex” and would be gone by 2017. Well, that didn't happen. We still have fish, in increased numbers — and much improved dams.

The “big lie” that has been circulated in the region by environmental groups for years — and now perpetuated by Trillhaase — is that the desire for Idaho water would magically go away if the dams were removed. The reality is that Idaho's water is legally protected by the 2004 water rights agreement approved by Congress, an agreement that doesn't expire until 2034 and can be renewed for another 30 years, as needed. This agreement was supported by Idaho's governor, the Legislature and our entire congressional delegation, including Congressman Mike Simpson. And there is even an off-ramp in the agreement, providing that Idaho's contributions for flow augmentation can be ended if it is determined that the water is no longer needed. In short, not a single acre of farmland has been permanently dried up and our water supplies are protected under the agreement.

All of this is no thanks to the litigating environmental groups. They actively opposed the water rights agreement in Congress (they lost) and even challenged it in federal court (the case went nowhere). Instead of limiting Idaho's contributions to annual rentals from willing sellers when the water is available, they argued that inflated flow targets downstream need to be met every day, which would require some 3 million acre feet of water to be evacuated from Idaho's storage reservoirs in an average summer. This would have decimated Idaho agriculture and our state's economy. The environmental groups lost that case. They also lost a subsequent request for more flow augmentation from the upper basin. The federal "salmon judge" (Judge James Redden) ruled that the science and the socio-economic costs were not on their side. In short, they lost the leverage that they had hoped to gain against water users and the state of Idaho to get them to support dam removal.

Now the environmental groups are at it again, seeking to divide our state and create a political constituency for dam removal. Trillhaase is apparently operating from the same playbook. The problem for them is that Idaho's water is not a bargaining chip.

It is firmly protected by the 2004 agreement. Trillhaase and the litigating environmental groups will need to look elsewhere to generate support for their dam removal plans. We stand united — as one state — in support of our water and the dams.

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