

Trump issues order on Columbia and Snake River dams. He wants fewer regulations

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President Trump on Friday ordered the removal of what he called “unnecessary” regulatory burdens on Columbia and Snake River hydropower dams.

He signed a presidential memorandum requiring that a new environmental study on management of the eight dams operated by the Army Corps of Engineers be completed a year sooner than previously planned.

“Moving up the deadline ... is a procedural win that will give more certainty to the communities whose livelihoods depend on effective operations of our dams,” said Rep. Dan Newhouse, R-Wash., on Friday.

But Joseph Bogaard of Save Our Wild Salmon of Seattle said the memorandum looked “like politics a few weeks ahead of an election rather than real meaningful policy.”

In 2016, a federal judge in Portland overturned a 2014 management plan for the dams, finding it did too little to protect salmon runs, and ordered a new management plan that could [include tearing down](#) the four lower Snake River dams.

This [presidential memorandum](#) moves the completion of the new management plan, called a biological opinion or BiOp, from 2021 to 2020. It would ensure the plan is completed during Trump’s current term.

A schedule for reaching that goal must be submitted within 60 days, the memorandum said.

It ordered the secretaries of Interior, Commerce and Energy, along with the assistant secretary of the Army for Civil Works under the direction of the Secretary of the Army, to develop the schedule.

The secretaries of the Interior and Commerce must work together to minimize regulatory burdens and increase the efficiency of decision-making so that water projects in the West are better able to meet the demands of their intended purposes, the memorandum said.



Ice Harbor Dam on the Snake River near Burbank is shown lighted at night.

**D. G. Rigg** Courtesy Army Corps

The 2014 BiOp was the result of collaboration between the Obama administration, states and Northwest tribes to protect salmon while operating dams.

But in 2016 U.S. Judge Michael Simon in Portland found that the BiOp did not do enough to protect salmon and ordered a new environmental study that would include the option of tearing

down the Snake River dams from Ice Harbor Dam near Burbank upriver to Lower Granite Dam near Pomeroy.

He also ordered [more water to be spilled](#) over the Snake and Columbia dams in the spring starting in 2018, with the goal of helping young salmon on their way to the ocean.

Water that is spilled cannot be used to produce inexpensive electricity, which increases utility bills for Northwest ratepayers. Some opponents of the spill say it could harm, rather than help salmon.

A joint press release from the offices of Newhouse and Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash., said the judge is “dictating new river operations from behind the bench” and throwing the river system’s operations into disarray.

The judge’s actions have forced uncertainty upon the Bonneville Power Administration’s ability to manage the power transmission system, it said.

“Dams and fish coexist, and after more than two decades in the courtroom, we should let scientists, not judges, manage our river systems and get to work to further improve fish recovery efforts,” McMorris Rodgers said.

Trump’s action Friday meets those goals, she said.



Lower Granite Dam near Pomeroy, Wash., is one of four lower Snake River dams covered by a court-ordered environmental study. The study is looking at removing or breaching the four hydropower dams as one option to improve salmon runs.

Courtesy Army Corps

But Glen Spain, Northwest regional director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations, said the presidential memorandum will only create more confusion, errors and litigation.

"It's a mistake to take one of the most complex systems in the country and put it on a short timeline for analysis," he said.

The largest problem is not over regulation of the Columbia and Snake River system, he Spain said, but not enough water, especially given climate change, for all the demands on the system.

The Northwest will not benefit from the Trump administration jumping into the issue and playing politics with Northwest salmon and rivers, Bogaard said.

"We need a thorough, objective analysis of salmon recovery options in the Columbia and Snake rivers," he said.

It will take people working together to find solutions, he added.

The order on the Columbia and Snake dams was part of a presidential memorandum addressing reliable water access in the West.

"We have to make sure American farmers and their families, wherever they may be, wherever they may go, have the infrastructure projects that they need to compete and grow," Trump said in a statement released by the White House Office of the Press Secretary.

The memorandum said the federal government has invested enormous resources in water infrastructure in the West to reduce flood risks to communities; provide reliable water supplies for farms, families, businesses, and fish and wildlife; and to generate hydropower.

"Decades of uncoordinated, piecemeal regulatory actions have diminished the ability of our federal infrastructure, however, to deliver water and power in an efficient, cost-effective way," the memorandum said.

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