

3/9/2020 CRSO DEIS One-Pager

The Columbia River System Operations Draft Environmental Impact Statement (CRSO DEIS) was released on 2/28/2020.

Background

A National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review was ordered by Federal District Court Judge Michael Simon in 2016 to specifically study the breaching of the four lower Snake River dams (LSRD).

NEPA, by statute, requires a balanced look at fish & wildlife, socioeconomics, and the environment.

Implications of Dam Breaching

While there were several options for the federal agencies to review, the most controversial was breaching the LSRD. The DEIS found that while salmon would do better without the dams in place, the benefit to fish is uncertain, while the societal costs would be extreme.

The study found that breaching the LSRD would:

- Double the risk of region-wide blackouts
- Add 3 million metric tons of carbon to the atmosphere each year from electricity production.¹ That equates to a 10% increase in the electricity sector's entire carbon output.

¹ Assumes the lost generation is replaced with natural gas-fueled power plants

- Cost \$1 billion a year and raise residential utility bills by 25% or more.²
- Reduce our ability to safely add new wind and solar power to the grid.
- Cost \$457 million in social welfare as the result of lost irrigation and jobs for farm laborers.

Preferred Alternative

Given the major societal costs of dam breaching, the federal agencies decided on a Preferred Alternative that keeps the LSRD, but increases “spill” (i.e., water going over dams instead of through turbines) across the eight dams on the lower Columbia and Snake rivers.

The idea is to help more juvenile migrating salmon avoid hydroturbines. However, there is reputable science which indicates that the nitrogen trapped in the water by spill may kill more fish than it helps.

The action agencies are forecasting that Bonneville Power Administration wholesale power rates will increase approximately 3% under the Preferred Alternative. That would equate roughly to a 1.5% rate increase for residential customers.

Next Steps

The current timeline includes a 45-day public comment period for the DEIS which ends on 4/13/2020. After the comment period, the federal agencies will review the comments, make adjustments, and then issue a final EIS by June 30. The federal agency heads will each issue a formal Record of Decision by September 30.

² Assumes the lost generation is replaced with a carbon-free portfolio, such as wind, solar and batteries.