

FIELD HEARING HELD ON ESA POWER COSTS

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A Ford -New Holland tractor with a banner that read, "Save Our Dams," greeted the nearly 200 attendees of the House Water and Power Subcommittee oversight field hearing held in Pasco, Washington on Friday, July 7th. Inside the Gjerde Multipurpose room of the Columbia Basin College where the hearing was held, a large poster read "Economics of Fish Spills in the Northwest -- \$77 million in lost power generation divided by 20 fish equals \$3.85 million per fish."

Entitled, "Electricity Prices and Salmon – Finding a Balance," the field hearing was chaired by Congresswoman Cathy McMorris (R-WA) and attended by Congressman Doc Hastings (R-WA). The purpose of the hearing was to draw attention to the actual percentage of electricity bills attributed to salmon recovery efforts and compliance with the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

"While many people believe approximately 5% of their power bill goes toward salmon, the real percentage is 30% of Bonneville's power rate," testified Mr. Steve Wright, Administrator, Bonneville Power Administration. Mr. Wright was one of eleven individuals to testify before the subcommittee.

Mr. Ron Reiman, a farmer and owner of T & R Farms Inc. in Pasco, discussed the added burdens placed upon farmers in the region due to uncertain power rates and water supplies and the reluctance of bankers to lend money for purchasing farm land. Mr. Chris Voight, Executive Director of the Washington State Potato Commission and member of the Family Farm Alliance, echoed those comments by saying, "potato processors are relocating in Canada where water and power supplies are more certain."

Referenced by many of the witnesses was legislation introduced by Congressman McMorris to inform the public of the power costs associated with the ESA. Known as the "Endangered Species Compliance and Transparency Act of 2006" (H.R. 4857), the 2-page bill would require the Administrators of the Bonneville Power Administration, and the other power marketing administrations, to include in the monthly billings "the costs of each customer's share of the direct and indirect costs incurred by each administration related to compliance with the ESA."

While most of the witnesses supported H.R. 4857 in the interests of consumers' right-to-know, Ms. Nancy Hirsh, Policy Director of the Northwest Energy Coalition, testified, "Transparency of costs is a laudable goal, but salmon recovery should not be unfairly singled out."

Ms. Rebecca Miles, Commissioner of the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission and Chair of the Nez Pearce said, "Rather than single out salmon, we should be aware of all the costs associated with our power bill."

"We strongly support the bill...I think people would be pleased to know how committed we are to saving salmon," said Ms. Terry Flores, Director of the Northwest River Partners, an organization of agriculture, utility and transportation industries. However, Ms. Flores went on to say technologies like fish slides are 97% effective in moving salmon and result in spilling much less water than major dam releases.

After the two hour hearing was finished, Congresswoman McMorris told NWRA, "What I wanted to accomplish today was to show how much we are spending on salmon, I think we have done that."

Mr. Tom Myrum, Executive Director of the Washington State Water Resources Association described the hearing as, "An important step towards educating the people of the northwest about how the Columbia River ESA costs affect them personally."

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