

"Dams for Fish" proposal still afloat

by David E. Ortman

The Yakima River basin encompasses about 6,100 square miles in southcentral Washington. It is the home of what was once a magnificent run of half a million spring Chinook salmon. But the salmon are mostly gone now, decimated by the dams built over the years by the Bureau of Reclamation to meet the clamoring demands of irrigators.

The basis of life in the Yakima basin is water rights, both for the remnant fish and for the irrigators. In low water years, like 1977, there is simply not enough water to go around. And in good water years, water sits in Bureau of Reclamation reservoirs rather than providing instream flows for spawning salmon.

The water rights issue is complicated by several factors. One is the fact that the irrigation districts are split under a 1945 court consent decree between those districts which are guaranteed 100% of their water allocation and those which received a percentage basis in low water years. In low water years, with the Yakima system over-allocated, instream flows for fish became nonexistent. However, the 1.4 million acre Yakima Indian Nation has recently established certain rights under their treaty similar to the Boldt decision, and have begun to exercise those rights on behalf of the fish.

Many resource agencies, such as U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service, have despaired at the prospect of establishing instream flows adequate for salmon when the irrigation districts control and waste much, if not all, of the Yakima water. Slowly these agencies came to believe that the only way to insure instream flows was to have their own pool of water to be traded with the irrigators (or power people on the Columbia River) when needed. Hence the idea of "dams for fish".

The Bumping Lake Enlargement, a many-decades-old proposal to expand an existing dam near Goose Prairie and the proposed Cougar Lakes wilderness area, was selected as a test case. The Bureau of Reclamation could no longer justify constructing dams based on irrigation benefits alone. They were anxious to keep up with the Corps as a dam building agency. In turn, the resource agencies were delighted. A large percentage of the "new" water from Bumping was earmarked for instream flows, the rest for supplemental irrigation to districts which did not receive a full allotment in low water years.

But the Bureau had not done its homework. During the late seventies it was learned that flood control and recreation benefits were claimed but never justified, the water supply figures for filling of the proposed enlarged reservoir were faulty, and an inadequate feasibility study was released. Worst of all, the Department of Interior Solicitor's Office issued an opinion stating that in low water years, because of over allocation, the irrigators could lay claim to all the water in the basin.

Congress refused to fund the Bumping Enlargement. Instead, in 1979 Congress authorized a feasibility study by the Department of Interior of the Yakima River Basin Enhancement Project.

The Enhancement Project is an attempt to find a mix of projects to meet the needs of instream flows, new irrigation for the Yakima Indian Nation, and supplemental irrigation for the water

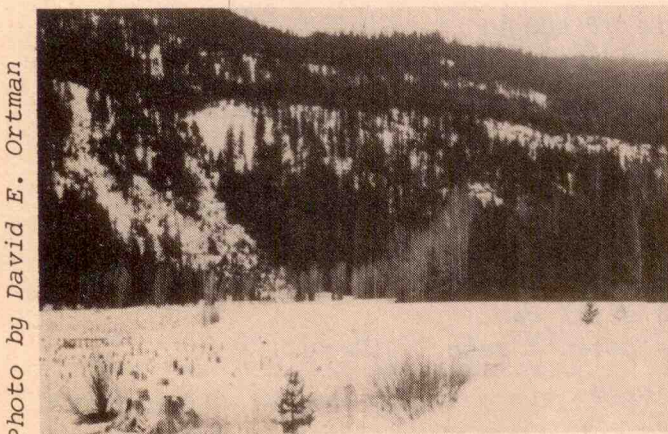


Photo by David E. Ortman

Bumping Lake near Goose Prairie, near the proposed Cougar Lakes Wilderness Area. A potential "dam for fish".

What does Friends of the Earth think about "Dams for Fish"? The following was submitted as comments on the Draft Bumping Lake Enlargement EIS in 1977.

We'll build a dam, the Bureau said,
We'll build one here, and here
And no one's gonna stop us as
We build a dam a year.

Irrigating two square miles
They flood another four
Unless, of course, the dam should break
And inundate some more.

"The fish," biologists cried out,
"The fish can't find their way,
We've found them 'tween the corn rows
and buried in the hay."

Trapped within the channels
Some have made it their careers
Like Moses through the Desert
Some have swum for forty years.

Now salvation is at hand
Though I'm doubtful, I confess
Perhaps the fish will understand
When they read the EIS.

But the thing that mystifies me
Defying common logic
Is how this was left off of
Carter's list of Water Projects.

deficient districts. The Bureau of Reclamation has developed five plans. All propose three projects on the Yakima Indian Nation: Tampico, Simcoe, and Satus. All propose additional supplemental irrigation water. The major differences in the Plans revolve around whether the Bumping Enlargement is included or not, or whether some other dam for fish should be built. A nonstructural emphasis plan is included amongst the five, but is not being given much attention by the Bureau.

The Bureau has been holding a series

of public workshops in the Yakima Basin area to receive input on which new "dams for fish" the Bureau will recommend building. If you wish to be on their mailing list, write:

Yakima Enhancement Project
Bureau of Reclamation
Box 043 550 W. Fort St.
Boise, ID 83724

Also, send your name and address to N.W. Friends of the Earth, Yakima Project, 4512 University Way N.E., Seattle, WA 98105 and we will place you on our mailing list. □

Spotted Owl *(continued from page 3)*

monitor of environmental fitness for old-growth species.

An old-growth forest is a system of interactions. Plant growth from sunlight and predator-prey interactions are two of the more observable. But, fungi and bacterial actions which break down wood fiber for nutrient cycling are also occurring. The dispersion of underground fungal spores by rodents in the establishment of mycorrhizal associations is still being investigated. All the interactions, both obvious and subtle, constitute the important balance that maintains the old-growth forest environment.

Historically, old-growth forests stretched across much of the Pacific Northwest. These forests, though continuous, were comprised of a wide range of microhabitats, developed through

local environmental factors. Over time, these microhabitats become integrated into complex and varied forest.

Historic and current land use patterns have reduced the size of forested areas. Old-growth forests have been segregated into smaller tracts. These disjunct microhabitats are often the last vestiges of a much more complex old-growth forest.

The remaining areas of old-growth forest provide habitat for plant and animal species which have become dependent upon the stability of that environment. Much study has been done, and concern has been shown for the spotted owl. As a single species of old-growth forests, the spotted owl has an important role. And the loss of spotted owls would be tragic. However, the subsequent loss of the complex and diverse old-growth ecosystem of which the spotted owl is only a part would be far greater. □