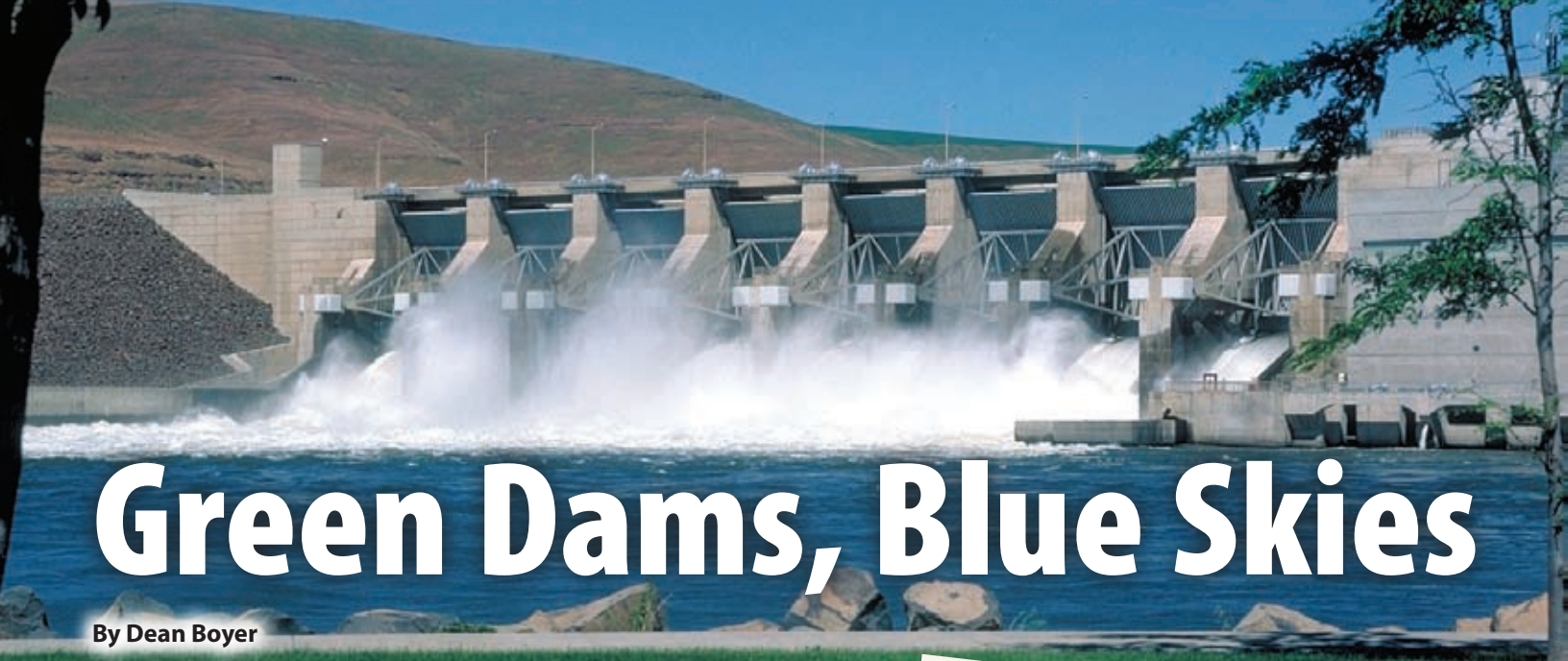

Green Dams, Blue Skies

By Dean Boyer

Campaign seeks grassroots support for the region's dams and renewable hydropower

Supporters of the region's working rivers are embarking on an aggressive campaign to raise awareness about the value of the Pacific Northwest hydroelectric system, the strides being made in fish survival with improvements at the dams, and the benefits that would be lost to the region if any of the dams were removed.

Sponsored by Northwest RiverPartners – a coalition of organizations and businesses that support science-based, cost-effective salmon recovery – the Green Dams, Blue Skies campaign is an effort to embrace the multiple benefits of the region's federal hydroelectric system and to counter efforts by some environmental groups to breach the four hydropower dams on the lower Snake River.

"RiverPartners is celebrating everything the hydro system does for us," said RiverPartners Executive Director Terry Flores.

Flores said RiverPartners would provide the marketing materials – handouts, sample resolutions, bill inserts, speeches and other materials – that organizations can use to help educate others. Individuals are also being asked to lend their support to the Green Dams, Blue Skies campaign by signing up at www.nwriverpartners.org

Franklin County PUD Manager Jean Ryckman welcomed the campaign.

"It is time to step up to the plate and let our customers and people in the region know we value our river, our dams and our quality of life here in the Pacific Northwest – and that breaching the four lower Snake River dams is not an option," Ryckman said. "Our hydro system supplies low-cost, renewable and reliable power as well as barge transportation, irrigation, flood control, recreation and other benefits."

Franklin PUD, the Washington Public Utility Districts Association and 19 other Washington PUDs are among more than 100 utilities, municipalities, port districts and farm organizations that have already joined Northwest RiverPartners to promote the multiple-use benefits of the rivers.

According to the Bonneville Power Administration, there are now 55 dams in the Columbia River Basin – an area that includes parts of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada and British Columbia – that were built exclusively to provide hydroelectric power.

Thirty-five of those are federal dams operated by the Army Corps of Engineers or the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. The others are owned and operated by various public and private utilities.

For example, Seattle City Light operates three dams on the Skagit River and one in Pend Oreille County. Puget Sound Energy operates two dams on the Baker River, a tributary of the Skagit River and one on the Puyallup River. Several public utility districts also operate their own hydroelectric dams.

There are dozens more multipurpose dams in the Columbia River basin that also provide navigation for barges, irrigation for arid farmland, and flood control, in addition to hydropower.

The Northwest relies on hydropower for about two-thirds of its electricity, and 40

percent of all the hydropower in the United States comes from the Federal Columbia River Power System.

Consequently, the Northwest has needed fewer thermal generation plants, such as coal and natural gas, which has helped keep the air cleaner. And unlike wind or solar, hydropower is always available on short notice, improving reliability of the Northwest power grid when consumer demand for electricity is high.

Because of the hydroelectric system, the region also enjoys some of the lowest cost electricity in the nation.

The Bonneville Power Administration says the four lower Snake River dams, for example, can generate power for about $10 per megawatt-hour, compared to buying replacement power on the open market for as much as $60 per megawatt-hour. Those four dams alone supply almost 3,500 megawatts of capacity, enough to power a city the size of Seattle.

While there is no denying that the dams have affected native fish, RiverPartners points out that Northwest ratepayers have invested heavily in fish restoration. Since 1980, the Bonneville Power Administration has spent more than $8 billion on various fish and wildlife programs.

"Dam operators are working with fish and wildlife experts to ensure the highest survival possible for salmon – at no small cost to our region's electric customers," said John Saven, executive director of Northwest Requirements Utilities and RiverPartners chairman.

A study released by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration last fall found that recent survival rates for juvenile salmon migrating downstream through the Federal Columbia River System were as high as they were in the 1960s, before the Snake River dams were built. Upstream adult survival was 98 percent or greater.

The same study asserted that ocean conditions – not dams – are the primary influence on salmon populations.

"You can't propose to address the issue of salmon recovery by focusing on dams alone," Flores said. "Salmon restoration requires a comprehensive effort that includes restoring habitat, using hatcheries to jump-start nature, improving river conditions, helping fish past dams, and managing harvest."

Although the first hydroelectric dam in the Northwest was built in 1888 at Willamette Falls in Oregon City, the multipurpose nature of Columbia basin dams began during the conservation movement of the early 1900s, when President Theodore Roosevelt signed the Reclamation Act authorizing construction of dams for irrigation.

Water storage at federal projects on the Columbia and its principal tributaries now totals 55.3 million feet. Those dams now help irrigate million acres of farmland in Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana, and also enhance flood control throughout the Columbia River basin.

The Bureau of Reclamation continues to operate most of the federal dams built for water storage and irrigation.

In the late 1920s, the Corps of Engineers conducted a study that focused on the Columbia River's potential to generate electricity, which led to the construction of the region's first major hydroelectric dam, Bonneville, from 1933-37. And as the Bonneville Power Administration notes on its website, that study "shaped the river's development over the next 40 years."

The Corps of Engineers remains responsible for operating the federal hydroelectric dams.

The Columbia-Snake Inland Waterway is also a major shipping corridor, allowing for the low-cost, fuel-efficient movement of $2 billion worth of goods annually between Portland, Ore., and Lewiston, Idaho.

Agricultural crops from as far away as the upper Midwest travel by barge through the federally operated systems of locks, including more than 40 percent of the nation's wheat exports, while fuel and other materials are shipped upriver.

Barging is the least-costly, most fuel-efficient mode of inland transportation, often saving shippers 25 percent or more. A ton of cargo can be transported by barge more than 500 miles on a single gallon of fuel, compared to about 200 miles by rail and just 60 miles by truck.

It would take more than 120,000 rail cars, or 700,000 semi-trucks to carry the cargo that is now shipped down the river by barge, not only greatly increasing transportations costs, but traffic and exhaust emissions as well.

"There's solid, factual evidence that the dams provide enormous value to our region in many ways," Flores said. "We need to make sure that legislative and opinion leaders truly understand what's at stake when some critics start talking about dam removal." C

Green Dams Blue Skies
Celebrating the Power of the Northwest

For more information about the Green Dams, Blue Skies campaign, go to www.nwriverpartners.org