

Returning Salmon to Elko County Streams



The Owyhee Dam in Oregon first cut off passage of salmon into Elko County

Various groups and politicians are working to re-establish salmon spawning runs in local streams. Both chinook salmon and steelhead trout historically swam over a thousand miles from the Pacific Ocean to spawn in the Owyhee, Bruneau, and Jarbidge Rivers along with Salmon Falls Creek.

Numerous accounts and newspaper articles record Elkoans feasting on huge salmon caught in our northern streams. Each year, about 120,000 chinook salmon completed three runs up the Snake River and 150,000 sockeye salmon made yearly runs. The Snake River drainage and its tributaries was one of the most important spawning areas for these salmon.

Salmon that could grow to 30 pounds provided an important food source to Shoshone people across the Snake River drainage and Shoshone Falls near today's Twin Falls was an important fishing area. These falls also blocked salmon from the upper reaches of the Snake River.

Overfishing reduced fish numbers in the early 1900s and salmon were blocked from their annual spawning runs into Elko County in 1932 when the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation completed Oregon's Owyhee Dam. Salmon have been absent from all of the Snake River System since 1961 when dams closed off the lower Snake River.

Renewed interest has been generated to either remove dams on the Snake and Owyhee Rivers or at least require them to install structures that would allow salmon to continue their way upstream as was mandated in their original 1955 license.

Senator Harry Reid sent a letter to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commissions asking them to require Idaho Power to install fish passages on three Snake River dams as Idaho Power applies for renewal of its license to operate these dams. The letter stated "I ask that you ... seize upon this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make it possible for these great and endangered species to return to their historical spawning grounds in Nevada." Representative Shelley Berkley has also offered support for this concept. Senator Reid also added Nevada to the Pacific Salmon Recovery Fund, making us eligible to compete for portions of \$80 million to protect and restore salmon populations.

The Idaho Rivers Untied group calls for removal of the four dams on the lower Snake River, stating these will help salmon, save tax payers money and bring in other revenue to Idaho. They also state hydroelectric power can be replaced with green alternative energy sources, irrigation can continue, barge traffic can be replaced by rail traffic and sediment buildup in the reservoirs can be handled.

Save Our Wild Salmon's web site states "The Columbia-Snake Basin is one of the most dammed river systems on Earth. These dams are by far the biggest killer of endangered wild salmon and steelhead."

The Coalition for Nevada's Wildlife feels salmon reintroduction could be accomplished without land-use restrictions and the Truckee River Flyfishers web site states "We have an opportunity to restore salmon and steelhead to northern Nevada's rivers... Healthy fish and wildlife populations boost our rural economies and quality of life." The Nevada Board of Wildlife Commissioners also passed a resolution supporting the reintroduction of salmon and the Elko County Commissioners have at least discussed the issue.

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