

The Lower Snake River Dam Power Debate After 35 Years, Where Are We in Understanding, Decision and Action?

For decades, the Northwest has been in a quagmire of conflicting regional policies, beliefs and “power” politics that has hurt the Bonneville Power Administration, led to its financial insecurity, kept it from modernizing, and raised rates for its customers.

BPA has two primary roles. It markets federal hydropower and it operates the major electrical grid in the Northwest (NW). The two roles now conflict more than ever. Over the last decade, the grid has become far more important and valuable, while certain federal hydropower dams have become less important and less valuable.

Marketing federal hydropower and operating the major transmission grid in the NW are now in direct conflict as 1,000's of MW's of wind, solar, and battery are waiting for interconnection studies. With prices dropping rapidly for these renewables, they are competing with hydropower that is now more expensive. BPA's unwillingness to divest underperforming dams, such as the lower Snake River Dams (LSRDs), hurts BPA in two fundamental ways. It robs money from large storage dams that play the essential role of balancing large amounts of wind and solar, and it prevents taking advantage of the cheaper renewables to “charge” the storage dams. If the LRDs were breached, the storage dams, could be more effectively used to provide flexible reserve or peaking capacity days, weeks or months later. Of course, more balancing, reserve, ramping and peaking power could be delivered by rapidly expanding battery units.

A second conflict exacerbating the first conflict is the widely held “Big Belief” in the NW that the operation of all federal dams is “mandated” by congressional authorization, and that a dam cannot be unfunded by BPA and decommissioned by the Corps. Agencies, governors, environmental groups, fishing groups, farmers, the NW delegation, public and private utilities and private sector energy interests are positioned at opposite ends of these dual conflicts. They have evolved into a self-serving combination of alliances that can only result in the demise of affordable public power. This evolution has also created a broad regional culture of fear by those whose charge it is to do the studies, or more to the point, fear of financial repercussion and/or personal disenfranchisement. This means few to none want to be the first to speak out publicly.

Optimizing federal hydro by decommissioning underperforming projects and upgrading the grid allows far faster interconnection of 1,000's of MW's of wind, solar, and battery resources, at cheaper costs to rate payers. Breaching the LSRDs immediately frees up over 3,000 MWs of transmission capacity. This, of course, not only eliminates significant methane emissions from the reservoirs, but can accelerate the retirement of coal plants with a net increase in energy related jobs.

However, none of this will happen if left to regional decision makers. The rate payers and public at large cannot grasp and properly respond to the mass of conflicting positions. As Mona Charon the political analyst and columnist recently wrote, “When enough people in authority tell lies, they cripple their audience's capacity for reason.”

As in many similar cases around the U.S. over 200 years, it is Washington DC leadership in the form of the executive branch that must rise above the swamp and do what is right. Otherwise and once again, rate payers will be holding the bag of stranded assets and high cost power.

Prepared by Jim Waddell, Civil Engineer, US Army Corps of Engineers, Retired, PUD Commissioner. While the numbers quoted are supported by government data and reports, the political summary is my own and not a position of any organization.