

(Feasibility of Reintroduction of Anadromous Fish Above or Within the Hells Canyon Complex)

Habitat of the Snake River Plain

(E. 3.1-2, Chapter 3)

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I. Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of historic habitat conditions and of the flora and fauna associated with the Snake River Basin upstream of Hells Canyon Complex. It also presents an overview of present day habitat conditions and factors that have influenced present day habitat quality.

II. Conclusion

1. [The geomorphology, climate, terrestrial and aquatic vegetation are described in an historic context. Present conditions of terrestrial vegetation including invasion by noxious weeds and impacts of grazing on the plant community are described. The use of anadromous fish including Pacific lamprey is documented through historic records. Introduction of exotic fish species such as bass and crappies is recorded to have occurred after the turn of the century.] [This text is paraphrased] (Pages 3-15)

Response:

The BLM agrees with the information presented.

2. [The detrimental impacts of mining, water diversion and channel alterations, loss of fire from the ecosystem, timber harvest, juniper invasion, livestock grazing and farming are extensively documented from historic records. The impact of dams for irrigation and hydroelectric generation on anadromous fish is extensively reported. The pollution of streams and rivers by sediment, agricultural chemicals, and industrial waste is extensively documented. The increase in water temperature that made the streams less habitable by anadromous fish is described. It was noted that declines of Snake River anadromous fish runs, attributed to Columbia River commercial fisheries, began in the early 1900s.] [This text is paraphrased] (Pages 15-37)

Response:

The BLM agrees that anthropogenic activities since European settlement have led to the declines in anadromous fish. However, the selection of information appears to be strongly biased toward a worst-case scenario. This viewpoint supports continuance of the Applicant's current hatchery mitigation program and does not support providing passage over the Hells Canyon Complex dams.

III. Study Adequacy

The study appears to be adequate. It clearly documents the decline in anadromous fish habitat and the causes.

IV. BLM Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The documentation of the decline of the Snake River Basin anadromous fish by IPC is extensive. Although the habitat has drastically been altered, the study is negatively biased to portray the worst-case scenario. No effort is made to document improvements occurring since enforcement of the many laws passed to improve water quality. The implementation of ESA to protect bull trout and other species is also not mentioned. The need for clean water by the growing population may lead to greater efforts to correct pollution problems.

Recommendations

The Applicant has carefully avoided any projections of an improving trend in habitat attributable to enforcement of new laws. The BLM should carefully weigh the information presented in regard to the long-term trend for habitat improvement that could be expected as better management practices and Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDL's) are established. Any projected improvement in habitat must be weighed against an increasing human population in the Snake River Basin that will require ever greater amounts of water. The USFWS, which regulates ESA habitat issues in the Snake River above the Hells Canyon Complex, should be consulted for their opinion on current and future conditions. They deal with issues across the whole Basin and may have insight on future water use and expected impacts on fish. The result of this consultation would aid the BLM in planning its approach to the fish passage issues.