

Public Support is Strong for Hydroelectricity

By Terry Flores

We like to keep our finger on the pulse of public opinion about hydropower, salmon and dams, and we share it with legislators and decisionmakers so they also are aware of what the public believes.

With salmon politics and policies holding sway over operations on the Columbia-Snake river system in the past decade, Northwest RiverPartners is always eager to know just how the average citizen—and electricity user—views the situation.

In a nutshell, our April 2011 survey had mostly good news and some food for thought.

First, the good news. Hydropower is still considered the most practical source of energy for the Northwest, but we have seen its status erode somewhat as the public buys into the erroneous notion that wind and solar can replace it. Hydropower is considered renewable by a wide margin, 75 percent of respondents. Seventy percent think state legislatures and Congress should include hydropower as a renewable resource in legislation.

Unfortunately, lawmakers have not gotten this message. We intend to work on it. We hope the RiverPartners survey will help give legislators the courage to acknowledge hydro as quintessentially renewable and to support it as the Northwest's premier renewable.

Public support for removing Columbia or Snake river dams is practically nil. Of 10 factors, removing dams ranked at the bottom of the list as the least important in determining the future

of salmon in the Northwest.

Improving salmon technology at Northwest dams ranked first and, thankfully, that is exactly what has been done. Every one of the federal dams in the system now has new fish slides or other technologies to help young salmon migrating downstream. Now, we just need to make sure the public is aware of the good news.

As we have seen in past surveys, the public views removal of the Snake River dams as an extreme solution that could do more harm than good. This is by an incredibly wide margin of 73 percent opposed and only 10 percent in favor of removal.

As we watch the intense media run-up to the Elwha Dam removal on Washington's Olympic Peninsula, we like knowing people in the region strongly support hydropower and the Snake River dams. They want balance in how the multipurpose dams of the Columbia and Snake river operate.

While the public's support for hydropower is high, we are aware that RiverPartners and others who value the river system have a bigger job to do. We need to assure people are educated about the benefits of the system and that newcomers to the region know what the Columbia-Snake river system gives us in clean, renewable electricity and economic abundance.

We also want people to understand that while wind has a role in the region's energy picture, it can't replace hydropower as the foundation of the system. Like wind, hydropower is renewable. Unlike wind, hydropower is always there when you need it to serve customers.

We also see that if unnecessary fish and wildlife costs continue to pile on to the cost of the system, it diminishes the economic value of the resource. All of this is food for thought.

RiverPartners is pleased with the public's support for hydro, but we are not complacent. We are always on the lookout for opportunities to increase public support and appreciation for this amazing resource that serves Northwest families and businesses so reliably, so cleanly and so economically. ■

Terry Flores is executive director of Northwest RiverPartners, an alliance of farmers, utilities, ports and businesses that promotes the economic and environmental benefits of the Columbia and Snake rivers and salmon recovery policies based on sound science. For more information, please visit www.nwrivernpartners.org.

In a recent Northwest RiverPartners survey, 75 percent of respondents consider hydropower a renewable resource.

