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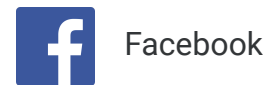
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Opinion

# Dam-managing agencies won't do the right thing for Snake River dams



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The Ice Harbor Dam on the Lower Snake River near Burbank, Wash. (JACKIE JOHNSTON/The Associated Press)

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**Anyone who believes our dam-managing agencies can do the right thing when it comes to salmon recovery is kidding themselves.**

By [Jim Waddell](#)

*Special to The Times*

I RECENTLY retired after a 35-year career with the Army Corps of Engineers. I worked with high-ranking Corps officials for much of that time, including more than one chief of engineers, the Corps equivalent of a CEO. I'm proud of my career, with one notable exception:

In 1999, after many years in Washington, D.C., I became the deputy district engineer at the Walla Walla District, which operates the four dams on the Lower Snake River in Eastern Washington. Staff there, with the help of the regional headquarters, was completing the final draft of an environmental-impact statement (EIS) for the four Snake River dams that would outline the pros and cons of salmon-recovery options.

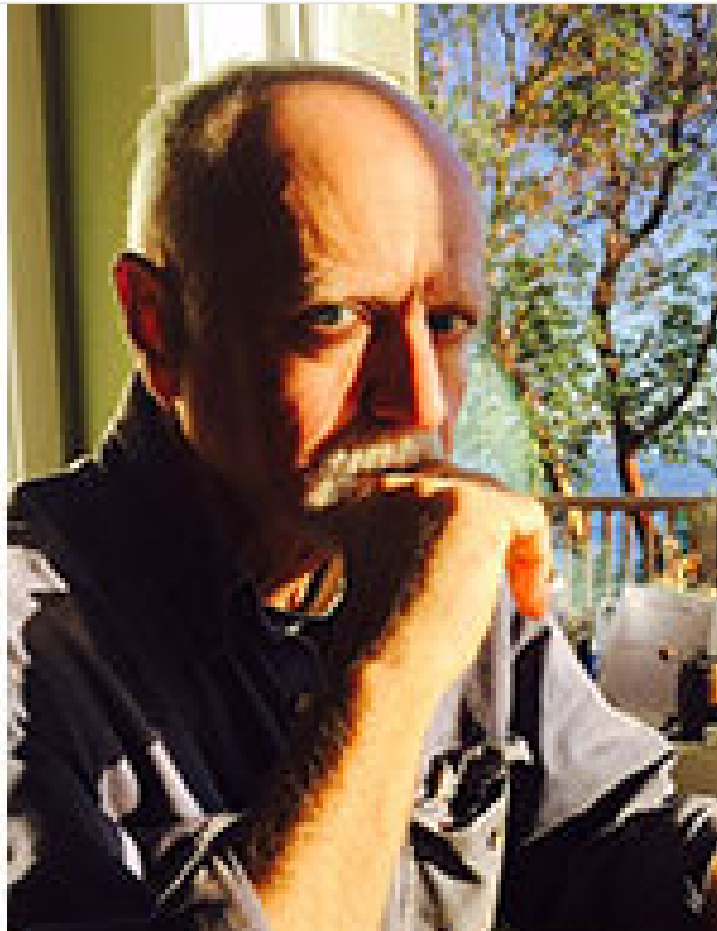
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including dam removal. My job was to ensure the EIS was unbiased, of high quality, timely and that an objective recommendation was rendered.

I failed on several counts.

First, [the EIS took seven years and cost \\$33 million](#). This was neither timely nor cost-efficient. Nonetheless, when I read the 3,000-page study, I concluded that dam breaching offers the best option — and now it is clear, it is the only biological choice to recover salmon runs from extinction.



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## Jim Waddell

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I also found the economics in the draft EIS to have numerous dubious assumptions, omissions and faulty conclusions that led me to believe that claims that dam removal would unleash “economic disaster” on Eastern Washington were false. My attempts to correct the cost and economic assumptions were rejected by my new Pacific Northwest bosses on the grounds that it was too late in the process.

### [Related: [Removing Snake River dams is bad for economy and salmon](#)]

In 2002, the EIS was approved, and the Corps largely stuck to status-quo operations. I erroneously assumed that even though the EIS had economic flaws, those who could contest it would have ample evidence to support breaching the dams.

Unfortunately, 14 years have passed without any serious consideration of removal. The Corps has spent nearly \$1 billion on dam improvements and the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) \$9 billion on other alternatives to justify continuance of these four dams. For Snake River salmon, there has been no improvement in survival or progress toward recovery. Reservoirs warm the water, a key factor in the death of nearly all sockeye swimming up the lower Snake River last year — and with climate change, this will be the norm. It is happening again as you read this.

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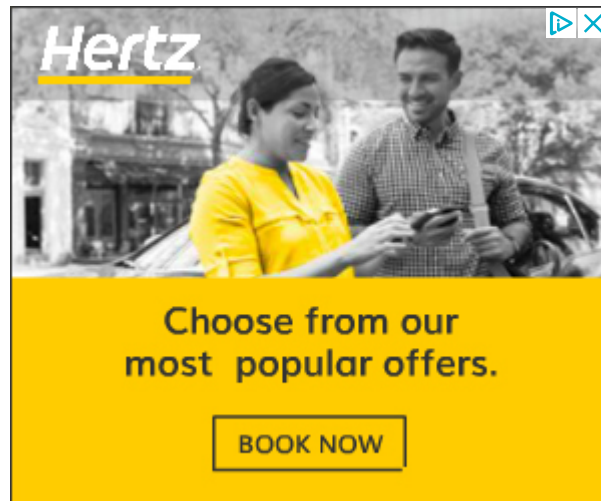
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It is with these facts and my own experience in mind that I'm not in the mood to celebrate [U.S. District Court Judge Michael Simon's decision last month](#) that, on the face of it, looks favorable to salmon recovery on the Columbia and Snake rivers. Simon has ordered federal agencies to engage the processes of the National Environmental Policy Act to ensure the next biological opinion is one that will actually recover fish. Trouble is, the 25-year history of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the BPA and the Corps suggests that these agencies' lawyers and managers may be combing through the environmental policy act to once again gamble on minimally meeting the letter of the law while grossly violating its spirit.

You can glean the subterfuge to come [in an agency brief filed in Simon's court](#). This document describes a minimum five-year study period to comply with the judge's order, and refers often to possible delays based on funding, staffing — or the decision they might make at any point to appeal Simon's ruling.



After 25 years of failure, anyone who believes dam-managing agencies can do the right thing is kidding themselves. The status quo has been willfully maintained as part of traditional politics in the Pacific Northwest. The insidious actions of the regional leadership of the Corps, BPA and NOAA Fisheries, and their allies in Congress and industry, have forced good scientists and engineers to distance themselves from their own work products, which tells us that small but expensive adjustments to the status quo won't work.

[Dam removal will work, create jobs and must start this year](#). But for that to happen, a critical mass of concerned citizens would have to recognize stagnation and pollution in their politicians as much as they see it in their rivers — and then make an unwavering

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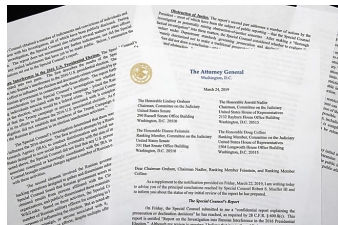
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