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"Operating Plan for Salmon in the Columbia River Basin"

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* "required information"
I want to thank Randy Hardy for quickly assembling this public meeting. And to Mr. Hardy, and the rest of our guests here today, let me say welcome to Montana -- I only wish I could be with you personally. Unfortunately, the Senate is in session and I must remain in Washington to cast my vote.

Let me begin these remarks by noting that Randy Hardy is no stranger to Northwest Montana. In fact, I think it's safe to say he has spent more time in our state than any BPA Administrator in recent memory. Less than a year ago, he accepted my invitation to hold two days of public meetings in Columbia Falls, Eureka, and Libby.

During these meetings, the people of Northwest Montana spoke out eloquently, but loud and clear. They helped persuade Mr. Hardy to keep the BPA rate increase to a minimum and, in order to help sustain lake levels at Hungry Horse and Kookanusa, to secure additional water from British Columbia.

Like the rate increase that hung over our heads a year ago, the people of Montana are deeply concerned about the proposed operating plan for salmon in the Columbia River Basin. I share these concerns:

- What will it mean for our economy?
- What will it mean for our fisheries and environment?
- What will it mean for our recreation and way of life?
- And, finally, will it work?

While no Montanan wants to see the salmon driven into extinction, we do want -- in fact, we demand -- that our interests be fairly balanced into any plan to protect the salmon. In a word, we insist upon fairness. Fairness, that is what I demand; that is what Governor Racicot demands; and that is what every single Montanan in this room tonight demands.

Yet, unfortunately, judging from some of the talk coming out of the National Marine Fisheries Service, there is a very real question about the fairness of this plan. Like most Montanans, I was dismayed to hear a senior NMFS biologist imply that saving the salmon was the only consideration, the only priority for his agency -- even if that means decimating Montana fisheries and driving the Bull Trout and the White Sturgeon onto the endangered species list.

[more]
Such thinking is polarizing and short-sighted. Rather than focus solely on the salmon, it is the job of federal officials to carefully consider all legitimate needs along the Columbia River Basin. With this in mind, I believe there are a number of steps that should be immediately taken to make this plan a fairer deal for Montana:

First, I believe it is possible for the Bonneville Power Administration to once again negotiate the acquisition of additional water from Canada. I recently wrote to Mr. Hardy urging him to move quickly on this matter. While this will not solve the problems at Hungry Horse and Koocanusa, it will help.

Second, I also believe BPA should offer incentives for power producers to store water behind both Montana dams. This would, in turn, raise lake levels. Since we are presently in a "soft" energy market, such an incentive should be an attractive option for many power producers. Again, I have urged Mr. Hardy to act immediately on this matter.

Third, I believe the NMFS plan focuses too much on water releases from our dams. There are, after all, other threats to the salmon. Any plan that is truly fair, must also involve a greater curtailment of development activities downstream. Downstream timber, mining, and grazing must all be called upon to do their fair share.

Fourth, I find it ironic that commercial fishing poses one of the greatest threats to the salmon populations we are now trying to save. We’re trying to have our salmon and eat ‘em too. It is estimated that 75% of the commercial salmon harvest of fall chinook salmon occurs off the west coast of Vancouver Island. This harvest could be dramatically curtailed if the Canadian and U.S. governments would reach agreement on a salmon treaty that aims to recover wild salmon populations. I will be asking President Clinton to make negotiation of such a treaty a top priority. Beyond this, I urge NMFS to take whatever regulatory action is necessary to curtail the commercial harvest of salmon in U.S. coastal waters and the lower Columbia River.

And, finally, I believe there is a fifth course of action that should be taken. For years, we have been releasing hatchery raised salmon into the Columbia River System. While these hatchery fish have created opportunities for commercial and sports fishermen, their release has also created inbreeding with wild salmon. If our goal is to sustain wild salmon populations, we should eliminate or limit this practice.

In closing, I again thank each of our guests for coming to Montana. Over the next few hours, you will hear from a number of concerned Montanans. Their concerns are very real, very sincere, and very important to me.

I urge you to approach every point of view with an open mind. I urge you to listen, not just hear, but really listen. And, when you leave, I urge you to roll up your sleeves and do your best to respond to what you have heard.

Thank you.