

Comment: BPA's part in infrastructure bill aids clean energy

Sen. Cantwell deserves support for a proposal to increase the hydropower agency's borrowing authority.

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 - **OPINION** COMMENTARY
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By Christine Reid and Kurt Miller / For The Herald

Being an elected leader isn't for the faint of heart. Trying to do the right thing for your constituents often means opening yourself up to criticism.

As an example, Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., introduced language into the federal infrastructure package to increase the borrowing authority for the Bonneville Power Administration, the federal power marketing agency.

Cantwell's support for BPA makes a great deal of sense, because BPA is the region's largest hydropower provider and is at the heart of a public power network that generates electricity for millions of utility customers across the Pacific Northwest. This network provides the least carbon-intensive electric grid in the nation and the most affordable and accessible clean energy in the country.

Surprisingly, despite its commonsense basis, Cantwell's proposal has garnered some harsh critiques.

Justin Hayes, the head of the Idaho Conservation League wrote a critical op-ed referring to the, "putrid, hot reservoirs [behind BPA dams]." He also wrote that Cantwell's legislation represents a "bigger line of credit to continue failed policies." He argues that BPA, "cannot reliably compete on price in the West's rapidly changing energy markets."

In sympathy with that argument, Chris Wood, president and CEO of Trout Unlimited, said, "It's a mistake to divorce BPA's financial crisis from the salmon challenge." He also stated, "It's an absolute get-out-of-jail-free card' for the Bonneville Power Administration."

We recognize that Hayes and Wood are following their heartfelt beliefs, but their statements demonstrate the extreme perspectives of many in the anti-dam crowd.

Hayes' contention about BPA not being able to compete on price isn't accurate. BPA just announced a decrease in the power supply rate it charges its customers. BPA's rate for firm, on-demand energy was already much less expensive than building new renewable resources with battery backup.

As proof of this point, both the Idaho Conservation League and Trout Unlimited backed a plan by U.S. Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, that earmarked \$10 billion to pay for more

expensive energy sources to replace four lower Snake River dams. If the dams were truly losing money, then removing and replacing them should represent a net savings, not a cost. Instead, the hefty price tag demonstrates hydropower is a lower-cost resource.

Importantly, the region's hydropower resources also provide the basis for countless living wage jobs in utilities and federal agencies. IBEW 77, an electric workers union, alone represents over 8,300 members in Washington, Northern Idaho and parts of Montana. Over 4,000 IBEW 77 members work on or are associated with hydropower projects in the Pacific Northwest.

Criticism of Sen. Cantwell's support of increased borrowing authority for BPA also fails to recognize that the funds are not intended to be exclusively spent on hydropower projects. The funds can be used to finance transmission upgrades and expansions that will allow the buildout of new renewable energy projects. (It doesn't do much good to build a bunch of wind turbines in Montana if the energy can't get to the population centers that need it.)

If we're serious about salmon and orca recovery, we must also acknowledge climate change is the main driver of river and ocean temperature increases, both of which are deadly for salmon. Building new renewables and making the most of our existing carbon-free hydropower system are critical steps if we want to avert the worst climate outcomes.

In light of the United Nations' recent "code red" alert for humanity regarding the climate crisis, taking an extreme view that hinders our fight against climate change and tries to hold BPA's financial well-being hostage isn't good for anyone, especially our most disadvantaged communities.

In short, those who would put BPA in jail also risk placing our decarbonization efforts behind bars. Sen. Cantwell's support for this legislation is rooted in an understanding of these facts and BPA's importance to this region.

Christine Reid is the political director for the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 77. Reid works out of the IBEW-77 office in SeaTac. Kurt Miller is the executive director of Northwest RiverPartners, a not-for-profit organization that advocates hydropower for a better Northwest. Since joining in March 2019, Miller has made it a priority to find collaborative, science-driven solutions to energy and environmental challenges. He has spent almost 30 years in the Northwest energy and utilities industry, and established the first successful electricity brokerage business in the U.S.

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