

COLUMBIA RIVER REGIONAL FORUM

TECHNICAL MANAGEMENT TEAM CONFERENCE CALL NOTES

November 8, 2002

**CORPS OF ENGINEERS NORTHWESTERN DIVISION OFFICES
CUSTOM HOUSE
PORTLAND, OREGON**

TMT Internet Homepage: <http://www.nwd-wc.usace.army.mil/TMT/index.html>

FACILITATOR'S SUMMARY NOTES ON FUTURE ACTIONS

Facilitator: Donna Silverberg

The following notes are a summary of issues that are intended to point out future actions or issues that may need further discussion at upcoming meetings. These notes are not intended to be the “record” of the meeting, only a reminder for TMT members.

Chum Survey and Operations:

Today's conference call was held to discuss chum spawning status and operations. Oregon did a site visit earlier today and reported an increase in fish numbers since Tuesday. 57 chum were observed in the areas around Hamilton and Ives and 7 redds were found. Numbers of Chinook were also counted. The current Bonneville tailwater elevation is being operated at 11.3'. Oregon requested that the elevation be increased to a minimum of 11.5' to provide for chum spawning and for Chinook in Hamilton and Hardy Creek areas as well as the slough above Hamilton.

DISCUSSION: Paul Wagner noted that the BiOps' 120-125 kcfs should result in meeting the 11.5' minimum tailwater elevation that salmon managers' discussions have supported. However, BOR and BPA noted that, given the lack of a rain event thus far, this operation could negatively affect the Grand Coulee elevation of 1283' that has been discussed at TMT and IT to support resident fish needs—as well as future operations if rain does not occur soon. Instead, the COE suggested the 11.3' elevation be held until there is a significant rain event in the Cascades and in eastern and northern parts of the region that provides inflows to Grand Coulee. The BOR agreed to wait until there is precip and a rise in Hamilton Creek. NOAA Fisheries expressed that that a higher elevation would be beneficial AND they must also consider the long term sustainability of the operation. As such, they prefer to take a conservative approach, operate in accordance with natural precipitation, and maintain 11.3' until a rain event allows the elevation to increase.

On the other hand, USFWS and Oregon supported an 11.5' minimum elevation for spawning that is occurring now and dewater redds later, if weather conditions make such an action necessary. Ron Boyce stated that he did not believe that 2/10 of a foot at GCL and a 2-3 kcfs to meet this request would break the hydro system, and strongly preferred

a minimum tailwater of 11.5' below Bonneville. The USFWS agreed. Neither agency felt it would be beneficial to elevate the conflict to IT.

ACTION: The operation will continue at a tailwater of 11.3', while also maintaining a smoother, more stable level. TMT will revisit the issue at next Wednesday's TMT meeting and hope for a big rain event over the weekend.

ACTION: Paul Wagner will provide Oregon with a detailed written rationale explaining why the request for 11.5 cannot be implemented at this time.

Meeting Minutes

1. Greeting and Introductions

The November 8 Technical Management Team conference call to discuss the 2002 chum operation was chaired by Rudd Turner of the Corps and facilitated by Donna Silverberg. The following is a distillation, not a verbatim transcript, of items discussed at the meeting and actions taken. Anyone with questions or comments about these minutes should call Turner at 503/808-3935.

2. Field Status Report on Chum Spawning Below Bonneville Dam and Operational Recommendation.

An ODFW representative reported that numerous adult chum were observed in the Ives Island area during a site visit earlier today – we counted 56 chum and seven chum redds in the reach below Hamilton Creek. In addition, in that area, we counted 35 adult chinook and 14 coho, he said. Outside Pierce Island in the main channel, we saw 22 adult chinook and 11 chinook redds. In the channel break between Ives and Pierce Islands, we counted 107 adult chinook and 39 redds, he added.

The bottom line is that fish numbers have increased dramatically since Tuesday's survey, Boyce said. The creeks are still not running, although Hardy was watered up, he said – however, we saw no fish in any of the creeks. The purpose of today's conference call is to review the current operation (a minimum Bonneville tailwater elevation of 11.3 feet) in the context of today's survey information, Boyce said. In my opinion, he said, we probably have an adequate elevation for down in Hamilton Slough, but the problem is that at the top of the slough, chinook are attempting to spawn, but there isn't enough depth for them to do so – their backs are actually out of the water. For that reason, said Boyce, I would like to pursue the possibility of increasing the Bonneville tailwater depth to 11.5 feet to benefit that particular area. Was there any chum spawning in that area in

2001? Turner asked. No – they were all just below the mouth of Hamilton Creek, the ODFW representative replied.

My concern is that the rain that has been forecast has not yet materialized, said Scott Bettin – the spawners you’re talking about are chinook, but the focus of this operation is chum, and it sounds as though the 57 chum you observed today have adequate habitat in which to spawn. Also, he said, according to the most recent report I’ve seen from WDFW, chum are entering Greys River in small numbers, but there have been no reports of large numbers of chum hanging out waiting for the river levels to rise. No, but since Tuesday, we’ve seen a dramatic increase in the number of adult chum at Ives/Pierce Island, Boyce replied.

We’re not talking about a lot of additional water here, said Boyce – based on our surveys, 11.3 feet just does not look as good as 11.5 feet. We’re not exceeding 125 Kcfs out of Bonneville, he said; why can’t we use some of that operational flexibility to bump up the tailwater elevation slightly.

One concern is that, in the absence of a significant rain event so far this fall, it does look as though we will be approaching the 1283’ Grand Coulee elevation limit by November 15, said Bettin. What’s the issue there? Boyce asked. Reclamation would like to maintain a minimum Grand Coulee elevation of 1283 feet through mid-November for tribal kokanee operations in the reservoir, Tony Norris replied. That’s not a BiOp requirement, though, said Boyce. True, but it’s the elevation we’re targeting to manage that resource, Norris replied. Right now, we don’t have rain to fill Hamilton Creek, but fish are still able to access the slough – it just doesn’t make sense, to us, to bump the Bonneville tailwater up before we see any rain, he said. What happens if the rain doesn’t materialize, and the mainstem is the entire area we’re managing for chum spawning? Boyce asked. In that case, we need to be more conservative than ever in terms of increasing flows, because we would be using storage that may not be replaced, Turner replied.

Paul Wagner said that as long as Bonneville outflow doesn’t exceed 125 Kcfs at this point in the season, an 11.5-foot Bonneville tailwater elevation would be appropriate. On the other hand, he said, we would prefer that the Bureau meet its elevation commitment in Grand Coulee – would there be any possibility of bumping up Bonneville discharge by using water sources other than Grand Coulee? I don’t see that happening right now, Bettin replied.

Our real concern right now is the weather, because this fall is beginning to look more and more like fall 2000, which was the beginning of the very dry 2001 water year, Turner said. Here we’ve got the remnants of a typhoon from the South Pacific that was supposed to dump heavy rains over the Northwest beginning Wednesday, and instead the storm is breaking up before it reaches us. That’s the same pattern we saw in 2000, he said – storms would form up, march toward the coast, then break up before they reached us – as a result, the forecasts were consistently rich for several months. Who knows? said Turner – that may not be the case this year. However, in the Corps’ view, the weather pattern is looking a little ominous right now. NMFS shares that concern as well, said Wagner.

So what would the Corps prefer to do? Silverberg asked. We would prefer to hold on to the 11.3-foot tailwater elevation for at least a few days, and hope for a significant precipitation event to get things started, Turner replied -- once we bump up to an 11.5-foot tailwater elevation, we need to be able to sustain it. I'm talking about a rain event that provides significant precipitation not just here on the west side, but over the Cascades and into the eastern and northern basins as well, he said. And Grand Coulee will be pretty close to elevation 1283 on November 15 if we maintain the current operation? Chris Ross asked. Yes, Norris replied.

What about the Fish and Wildlife Service? Silverberg asked. The Fish and Wildlife Service would prefer to see a minimum tailwater elevation of 11.5 feet at this point, replied David Wills; we would rather begin with a little higher tailwater, then come down a bit if we have to during the incubation flow period. In other words, he said, we would prefer to dewater a few redds later than not give these fish a chance to spawn at this point.

And what is NMFS' view? Silverberg asked. That, while the higher elevation that is being requested would be beneficial to chum and chinook spawners at this point in the season, the long-term sustainability of the action is a concern -- for that reason, NMFS would prefer to take the more conservative approach and wait until natural precipitation arrives before increasing the Bonneville tailwater elevation, Wagner replied. And is it fair to say that Oregon and the Fish and Wildlife Service disagree with that position? Silverberg asked. Yes, it is, replied Boyce and Wills. We're talking about a difference of two-tenths of a foot and a few thousand cfs, Boyce said -- that's not going to make or break the hydrosystem, and I'm not hearing any compelling reasons why we shouldn't go to an 11.5-foot tailwater elevation now. It's true that it might require only 4 Kcfs-5 Kcfs in additional flow to provide an 11.5-foot tailwater elevation, said Bettin, but if we have to continue that augmentation for the next four to five months, that's where the operation gets scary.

In response to another question from Silverberg, both Boyce and Wills declined to elevate this issue to IT at this time, saying that, in their view, the IT would be unlikely to change the TMT's decision. Boyce requested that NMFS and the action agencies provide a detailed written explanation as to why the SOR cannot be implemented. We have discussed this several times, and there are meeting minutes documenting those discussions, and our reasons for preferring to hold the Bonneville tailwater elevation at 11.3 feet at this point in the season, said Turner -- what additional information are you looking for? Something in writing, Boyce replied. Wagner said he will develop such a written explanation.

In response to a request from Wills, Bettin said he will instruct the Bonneville project operators to maintain a smoother tailwater operation targeting an 11.3-foot minimum. What I'm hearing, then, is that the action agencies will continue with the current operation at Bonneville, with the caveat Dave Wills has just requested, but that Oregon and the Fish and Wildlife Service disagree with that decision, Silverberg summarized. No TMT disagreements were raised to this characterization.

With that, the conference call was adjourned. Meeting summary prepared by Jeff Kuechle, BPA contractor.