Fish 460 – PFMC Reflection

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The session I watched was session C.3 of the Pacific Fisheries Management Council meeting on March 6. Session C was titled Salmon Management, and C.3 specifically was the Klamath Dam Removal Update. As the title suggests, this was an informational session concerning the ongoing removal of four dams on the Klamath River. These dams block 400 miles of anadromous salmonid habitat, including the listed coho salmon. The effort has been called the largest dam removal in US history. It represents a prime opportunity to gather information for future dam removals; what went well, what went poorly, where are critical data gaps, and what impacts were predicted vs. actually seen? These questions will be important to answer.

Session C.3 was led by Jim Simondet, the NOAA Fisheries Klamath Branch Supervisor, who presented a slideshow update about the removal effort. The project is proceeding on-pace to finish the dam removal and open the upper watershed in time for the Klamath’s fall Chinook salmon run. He spent some time describing the short-term impacts that the dam removal has already caused, but noted that these impacts are well in line with perditions from the biological opinion from NOAA for the removal project.

An interesting issue was the inauguration of Fall Creek Hatchery, built to replace a hatchery which was too close to a dam scheduled for demolition. The recent first release of fish from this hatchery led to a major mortality event due to a gas bubble disease contracted while passing through a dam’s outlet tunnel. Mr. Simondet didn’t dwell on this issue, since the hatchery has a surplus of fish anyway, but did mention they will now be released below the tunnel. However, the incident was the source of some challenges during the Q&A portion of the talk. None other than the mayor of Crescent City chimed in to express frustration with the incident and what he considered to be the presenter’s “no big deal” attitude. It was clear he wanted a graver tone and possibly an admission of responsibility. His comment struck me as a tad perfunctory – not offering a new insight or asking a serious question. Perhaps I’m being too judgmental, but it seemed like a PR-minded move: speak at the meeting to make a mayorly appearance, and chastise the scientists for an incident that didn’t have good optics.

Another subject covered in the presentation that I found interesting as Mr. Simondet’s identification of major monitoring gaps in the upstream area that will soon become open to anadromy. He gave a brief outline of a proposed SONAR monitoring effort backed by several tribes and both states’ (i.e. California and Oregon) departments of fish and wildlife, among others. These are not concrete plans, however, since he stressed that this proposal is underfunded right after stressing the size of the monitoring gaps. This was certainly a call for awareness and an advertising opportunity. Interestingly, during the Q&A phase after his presentation, a CDFW representative took issue with this part of the presentation, denying that the data gaps exist and saying that the requisite surveys are “all good” on the California side of the watershed. He specifically used the phrase “all bases covered,” which speaks to a starkly different perception of the quality and coverage of the data currently being gathered. This didn’t spiral into a larger debate, but it speaks to the fact that when multiple agencies work together, different expectations and priorities can cause some to see efforts as successes and others to see the same efforts as insufficient.

Most other questions were from members of the PFMC council, who were primarily interested in the implications of this removal for marine stocks. However, since this was primarily an informative session, there was no extended debate or decision reached. While a closer look into the decision-making process of the council would have been interesting, I was fascinated by this topic and the content of the presentation, and I enjoyed seeing the varying responses in the in-person and online public comments.

I’ll conclude this reflection with two of my favorite quotes from the meeting, both of which I think say a lot about the field of fisheries:

* A council member to Mr. Simondet:

“There are so few tangibles in our line of work, and you got one, so congratulations.” The dam removal is highly publicized in part because it is a very tangible and visceral action. Numbers of a fish, determination of yields, policy recommendations, and population models just don’t have the same immediacy.

* When asked why a proposal that the council seemed excited about wasn’t carried out:

“The funding has yet to catch up with the intent.”

A relatable sentiment for many fisheries and environmental professionals, I’m sure.