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Killing King salmon

FEW THINGS are as awe-inspiring as the annual migration of King salmon, the heaviest part of which takes place each fall. Fewer events are as disheartening as watching those fish die in dry gravel beds or too-shallow pools that were once rippling rivers before they have a chance to spawn.

That's what is happening to America's salmon run in the West because of the interests of ranchers and their massive irrigation systems.

The longest and most arduous journey of salmon, and steelhead trout is from the mouth of the Columbia River in Oregon to the placid, shallow stream that was their birthplace, 7,000 feet up in the Sawtooth Valley of Idaho. To see them there—knowing they had come 900 miles over eight hydroelectric dams, and using their last energies to spawn before they die—is a long-remembered experience.

Due to public pressure, each of these dams, at a cost of millions of dollars, is now equipped with fish ladders and other devices to aid

some of the salmon in scaling the great dams. But the continuance of those annual spawning runs, which should be a source of national pride, is in danger of becoming a national tragedy.

The final destination of many of the fish is in the heart of the 750,000 acre Sawtooth National Recreation Area near Sun Valley, Idaho. The recreation area is protected by donations of public land and \$56 million in taxpayers' money to buy private parcels and create easements. The recreation area is managed by the U.S. Forest Service and is set aside for the public's enjoyment and to protect an important spawning ground for the steelhead trout and salmon.

A WEAKNESS in Western water law is that all of a river's water can be used to irrigate crops, pastures and hay fields. Many local ranchers are sensitive and cooperative concerning

the needs of the fish.

However, at least one ranch at the most critical stretch of the headwaters of the Salmon River in the recreation area is not so sensi-

Salmon and trout are being killed by outdated water policies.

tive and cooperative.

The ranch—which is owned by an absentee hobby rancher, a retired California heart surgeon—is allowed to draw out all the water from the stream that flows through the property to irrigate pasture land for over a thousand head of cattle. Idaho law and Forest Service policies let the ranch do that,

even though it's devastating for thousands of spawning salmon.

Many of the adult fish that make it to that stream are prevented from spawning and completing their life cycle. For those that do, many of their young hatchlings get drawn into the irrigation system and sprayed out onto the hay fields and left to die.

The Forest Service—required by law to manage the recreation area—should have condemned the water needed for the salmon's survival long before now. However, the forest service feels it needs congressional approval to do so.

GIVEN THE Idaho representatives' antipathy toward wildlife, this isn't likely to happen. The incoming senator, Larry Craig, a former congressman, wrote a letter defending the rights of the headwaters' ranch where salmon are being killed. The ranch has demanded that the gov-

ernment fund an overhead irrigation system before he will cooperate and share the needed water. The outgoing senator, Jim McClure, has arranged for the money to build the irrigation equipment.

The proposed maze of pipes and sprinklers is a giant jungle gym that will loom over the fields. Putting this kind of irrigation system in the Sawtooths is like putting a motorcycle race track in Arlington Cemetery. That bad precedent could lead to jungle-gym systems dotting the landscape as other ranchers demand equal treatment.

Water problems in the recreation area are typical of other areas in the West.

During the drought of two summers ago, 100 miles of Montana's best trout streams were drained. Rivers in Wyoming and Colorado have experienced similar fates. The reservoir in Nevada that is above the once blue-ribbon East Walker River in Southern California, was completely drained by hay farmers a couple of years ago. This resulted in a massive killing of all the trout in that river.

Our pre-horse-and-buggy water laws allow the abuse of fish and wildlife. It is time for the West and all of America to wake up and put a stop to this before our heritage is lost.