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Our View: Salmon need help from new administration

Steve Huffaker and Rod Sando are former directors of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game.

Ed Chaney and Bert Bowler are among Idaho's foremost salmon advocates.

Don Chapman is a regional salmon expert who spent a career advising electric utilities - and now supports breaching four hydroelectric dams in an attempt to save salmon.

These experts, among others, have co-authored a blunt assessment about the future of salmon, and a blistering indictment of the divisive politics and faulty science that have pushed the fish to the edge of extinction. The report has a specific audience: the Obama administration that now inherits jurisdiction over salmon. The report also should be required reading for anyone who cares about the region's salmon.

Citing low numbers of spawning redds in Idaho's Salmon River region - some of the Northwest's most pristine habitat - the authors say the salmon have made only modest population gains after nearly 20 years on the federal government's endangered species list.

The group isn't bashful about assessing blame.

In eight years in office, the Bush White House "systematically subverted" efforts to beef up recovery plans.

The Bonneville Power Administration - the federal agency that markets the region's hydropower and also bankrolls federal salmon recovery projects - has attempted to "shut down" its critics and "coerce support" for its recovery efforts. The BPA has cut deals with the state of Idaho and several Northwest Indian tribes, providing money for habitat programs if its partners agree not to go to federal court to argue for dam breaching.

Because Northwest hydroelectric production is a lucrative business, utilities and power customers have sought an oversight role in salmon recovery, resulting in "gridlock and conflict."

The experts' prognosis: "Only intervention by the highest levels of the Obama administration can cut through the varying interests to save the fish from looming extinction." This would sound like easily dismissed alarmism, were it not for the authors' credentials and expertise.

Consistent with the crisis at hand, the scientists make bold, controversial suggestions. They say Obama should appoint a senior official to lead and coordinate salmon recovery efforts scattered among an alphabet soup of federal agencies. The administration should work on a federal water management plan covering Northwest states. Calling the region's dams the "prime cause" of declining salmon populations, they argue for a National Academy of Sciences study of the costs and benefits of breaching the lower Snake River dams.

From a lesser group, this would read like a desperate wish list. But the group's experience gives credence to these recommendations.

A new president is inundated with advice from self-styled experts and bona fide authorities. These authors clearly fall into the latter category. They call themselves a "council of elders," career officials who now "are able to speak freely to avoid further harm to the public good." These scientists have spoken freely - and urgently - about the task at hand.

"Our View" is the editorial position of the Idaho Statesman. It is an unsigned opinion expressing the consensus of the Statesman's editorial board.