

WHO OPPOSES IRRIGATION?

By

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The Montana Fish and Game Department is in favor of maintaining the Big Hole River as a free-flowing stream. This stand constitutes opposition to the Reichle Dam feature of the Bureau of Reclamation's Jefferson-Whitehall project. Unfortunately this has been construed by some people to mean we are opposed to the entire irrigation project, which is certainly not true. We did, by concurring with the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife's official report on the Jefferson-Whitehall project, recommend that the project not be authorized for construction. But that statement was qualified in the report with - "Because it will destroy 10 miles of one of the nation's finest trout streams." Thus, we do not oppose the irrigation project, we merely feel that there must be some means of providing water for this project without destroying ten miles of the Big Hole River.

It has been widely publicized by proponents of this project that it contains fishery benefits. However, the fact that these possible benefits are based on certain conditions that have not been satisfactorily met has received very little publicity. Because of this, several questions have been asked that cast doubt on our sincerity, and even our sanity, in opposing Reichle Dam. I would like to discuss four of these in detail.

Question 1. Why do you oppose a project that contains fish and wildlife benefits?

These benefits are contingent upon certain conditions that have never been satisfactorily guaranteed to us. In fact we doubt they can ever be guaranteed in this state until Montana law recognizes the fish and wildlife use of water as a legal, beneficial use. Guarantees asked for are: 1. That flows for fish will stay in the river and not be diverted for other uses, 2. That silty return flows from new irrigated lands will not decrease water quality, and 3. That improved river reaches will not be flooded out by some future dam building project. The BuRec meets the first request by stating they will transfer storage from Reichle to Canyon Ferry and since it is their water it must stay in the river. We cannot accept this as a guarantee. About 8 years ago we paid over \$100,000.00 for water from West Fork Reservoir on the Bitterroot and we have never been able to use this water to keep the Bitterroot from going dry in certain places every year. True, we get our water delivered to the Buckhouse bridge near Missoula, but it goes across several fields instead of through the river channel on its way there. We know the 12,000 cfs of water rights filed upon in the main Jefferson River represent over 7 times its highest average July flow. It went dry this summer and we feel certain it will continue to go dry even with the addition of a 300 cfs release for fish from Reichle Dam.

Question 2. Why doesn't the Fish and Game Department agree with the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife on this project when they do on most others? Is

politics causing disagreement among professional fishery workers of the two agencies?

There is no disagreement either on our basic recommendation (don't build the dam because it will destroy 10 miles of the Big Hole) or on the benefits which would occur, if the previously mentioned conditions could be met, or on the fact that BuRec shouldn't use these benefits in selling the project until the conditions are met. The only minor point of disagreement was on whether these benefits should be furnished to BuRec before or after they had guaranteed the conditions. (Read BSF&W's recommendation and our first and last paragraphs in letter of concurrence.)

Question 3. Although you may not agree they can do it, at least the BuRec has plans to try to put water in the Jefferson. What do you offer except the bare rocks and dead fish we had this year?

The only solution we can offer is that the use of water for fish and wildlife and recreation be recognized under Montana law as a legal, beneficial use and that some minimum flow be required to be left in the stream for fish. Until this is done, no plan is guaranteeable. If it were done, we feel that BuRec might very well be able to give us a proper guarantee.

Question 4. You say some other water source should be found, BuRec says Reichle is the most economical source and they cannot recommend the project with any other dam, or combination of dams in it. The public must believe someone and the BuRec is the authority on dam building and irrigation. If they say this is the only feasible water source for Jefferson-Whitehall why shouldn't we accept their word on faith?

Accepting any agency's proposal on faith is almost a humorous suggestion to those of us in the Fish and Game Department. Sportsmen certainly don't accept our proposals on faith. They question them, and rightly so we feel. In our democracy no agency should be able to say "In our field we are expert so please don't question our proposal because there is no better one." We feel that the simple question, "Why can't this be changed?" usually results in more progress than does acceptance on blind faith.

For example, about 10 years ago Highway Engineers told us they operated under only one mandate - to build the straightest, the best and the most economical roads they could. They were sorry when they wrecked a stream but they just couldn't add any cost to their road construction to protect fish habitat. Fortunately, Montana's sportsmen, her Fish and Game Department and her Jaycees didn't accept that statement on faith. A lot of hard work was involved, but changes in state and federal legislation were made which have resulted in a real drop in loss of fish habitat from highway construction. These losses would still be going on if the engineers' first statements had been accepted on faith.

The BuRec's opinion that no other dam but Reichle is feasible for this project is based on the present legislation under which they operate. This requires that they design a project to obtain the most favorable benefit-cost ratio. However, Reichle Dam itself is only a \$12 million feature of an \$80 million project, and the project contains about a \$50 million power-profit subsidy for irrigation. We know that several, smaller, headwater dams would be more expensive than Reichle, but if irrigation is worth a \$50 million subsidy, isn't recreation worth at least a few million more? Perhaps under present dam financing this can't be done, but if it can't we feel that in a few years it will have to be done since recent studies have shown the value of water used for recreation to be several times that of water used for agriculture. And we feel it would be criminal to destroy ten miles of one of the nation's finest trout streams for an irrigation project whose urgency is at least questionable.

Even though the Reichle site is an economical place to build a dam, let's store water for the Jefferson-Whitehall project by destroying less important streams than the Big Hole River, even though this may take a few more years. And let's leave the Reichle site as it is so that it will be available in the future if it is needed for the survival of a burdgeoning human population.

Thus our stand may be summed up as: If the Jefferson-Whitehall project is really necessary lets store water for it in smaller, headwater dams, and if this takes a change in legislation, lets delay the project until that change can be made. And

lets leave the Reichle site for our decendants to build when they need it. The site itself isn't going to wear out in the meantime - it might even become more valuable. I am sure that if the people of this nation, 75 to 100 years from now really need Reichle's water storage, they would much prefer to have the site than to have a reservoir that has already lived a portion of its useful life.