

Dangers of dam breaching

By **GARY WIENS**, CEO of Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association

"The sky is not less blue because the blind man does not see it." – Danish Proverb.

Reality is the world in which we must continually strive to live. To do otherwise can be dangerous.

That is why efforts to breach dams in the Pacific Northwest — specifically, the Lower Snake River dams (LSRDs) — are of great concern. Breaching advocates argue this drastic action is necessary to protect the salmon in the Columbia River Basin.

Yet this plan obscures the totality of challenges facing salmon. A 2019 report from the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change specifically points to unabated warming oceans over the past 50 years as the main driver for salmon population declines.

Moreover, major upgrades to the lower Columbia and Snake River dams have led to a fish survival rate past each dam of 93 to 99 percent, depending on the species.

Here are additional key realities:

- Dam breaching threatens public safety — A government study in 2020 showed that breaching the LSRDs would double the region's risk of rolling power blackouts. This past year more than 500 people died from a heat dome that covered much of the Pacific Northwest. It would likely have been much worse if the grid had failed. And Montanans know that a power outage in the winter can put lives in jeopardy.

- Dam breaching ignores the bigger energy supply picture. People often say the LSRDs can be replaced, but they should first consider the region's broad decarbonization policy. We are rapidly losing resources that can reliably keep the grid in balance, such as coal- and natural gas-fired power plants. That means existing carbon-free, reliable resources such as hydropower and nuclear are becoming more important to help balance intermittent renewable energy.

- Dam breaching comes with big costs — A 2020 Environmental Impact Statement estimated it would cost \$16 billion over 20 years to replace the electric capabilities of the LSRDs with other clean-energy options.

In this month's *RM*, we delve into this important public-policy issue (see pages 12-13). We hope you'll take the time to read more about why the LSRDs are so important to Montana's electric cooperatives.