

Sunday, January 14, 1996
The Spokesman-Review

Hired scientists defy credibility
Public grapples for answers in wake of questionable reports

By Julie Titone Staff writer

Bull trout. Salvage logging. Salmon recovery. Mining waste. Whatever the Northwest environmental issue, the debate often can be reduced to a schoolyard challenge:

``Oh, yeah? Says who?"

Scientists provide information that policymakers rely on when they're deciding how to manage natural resources. But scientists often disagree. And because many scientists work either for industry or environmental groups, the public is left wondering whom to believe.

Scientists suspected of selling out to special interests are called ``hired guns" or even ``biostitutes."

Donald Chapman has been branded with those words.

``Mr. Chapman may be the Northwest's richest biologist, thanks to the aluminum companies and utilities who have employed him for the last decade to shift attention from the federal hydrosystem," salmon activists Charles Ray and Mitch Sanchotena wrote in a recent letter to Gov. Phil Batt.

They believe Chapman wrongly influenced a high-stakes report, ``Upstream: Salmon and Society in the Pacific Northwest."

Its conclusions may cause the National Marine Fisheries Service to drop reservoir drawdowns as a potential tactic to save the endangered Snake River salmon - against the advice of many state, tribal and federal biologists.

Eric Hanson, a biologist with the Yakama Indian Nation, also is skeptical of industry scientists after watching them in ``combat biology" over the spotted owl.

``It's funny how it almost always comes out in support of the timber industry position that we can go ahead and harvest old-growth timber and the owls will do just fine," he said.

California wildlife biologist Richard Buckberg is bagging his job as a consultant after 20 years of working for timber companies.

Buckberg posted a notice on a computer bulletin board asking whether scientists were frustrated by clients who don't want a thorough job. He received a dozen responses.

``Most agreed with my complaint, which is that it's very hard to be objective and unbiased and still be working," he said.

In response to an Internet inquiry about bias, scientists throughout the country said it's a problem. Their examples ranged from the impact of the sugar industry on Florida's Everglades to the effect of California development on endangered species.

Some consultants defended their integrity and that of their clients. Others said they chose to work where tenure or government mission shield them from pressure.

Many scientists said the best defense against bias is peer review, in which other experts scrutinize research before findings are published.

Much of the research sponsored by government does not get such a review, according to supporters of the proposed National Institute for the Environment.

As envisioned by supporters in Congress, the institute would improve the coordination and cost-effectiveness of environmental research, as well as its quality.

Hanson, the tribal biologist, said the public should be willing to pay for peer review. "This is an incredibly important issue in the late 20th-century natural resource arena."

In any search for experts, choices are limited. Many are perceived to be in one camp or another.

Industry certainly has its complaints against scientists used by environmental activists.

For example, Bruce Lovelin, executive director of the pro-industry Columbia River Alliance, is rankled that environmentalists frequently cite Phillip Mundy's work as evidence that barging young salmon around dams is not a good way to help them survive. The alliance likes barging; the environmentalists loathe it.

At the Intermountain Forest Industry Association, eyes roll at the mention of Arthur Partridge, who says forest diseases are natural and shouldn't be an excuse for cutting a lot of trees; and Allen Isaacson, who blames logging roads for erosion.

Then there's Thomas Powers, the University of Montana economist.

His studies typically conclude that natural resource industries "are doing things that diminish the quality of life, or that towns that owe their existence to logging or grazing do just fine when those industries disappear," said timber lobbyist Joe Hinson.

The environmentalists groaned when the forest industry association hired biologist Bill Platts to study bull trout, which are on the verge of an endangered species listing.

Platts concluded there never were many bull trout in a lot of Northwest streams.

The study was based on incomplete and in some cases misleading historical information, according to fisheries scientists who reviewed it. Environmentalist Barry Rosenberg agreed, saying the report tarnished Platts' "great reputation."

Scientists are stung the worst by criticism from their own ranks.

For example, a group of fish biologists compared those who work for the hydropower utilities to those who work for the tobacco industry and find no health problems with second-hand smoke.

The Idaho Chapter of the American Fisheries Society made that allegation in a professional journal this fall. Chapman was so outraged he considered dropping his 40-year society membership.

Scientists hired to advocate different positions can be useful for policymakers, said Ken Casavant, a member of the Northwest Power Planning Council. "They allow a guy like myself to look at the very best argument for an issue, and the very best argument against an issue."