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The Elwha River returning to life

REMOVAL of two big dams on the Elwha River in Olympic National Park is amazing because of the scale of the demolition project and, simply, because it is finally going to happen.

For years it has been lots of talk and wispy timelines, but mostly no action. Late last month that changed with the National Park Service signing a contract with a Montana firm to start dam removal a year from now, instead of 2012.

The schedule was moved up with a \$50 million infusion of stimulus money from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Demolition of the 108-foot-high Elwha Dam and the 210-foot-high Glines Canyon Dam will take time, but work will get under way.

America is sneaking up on a dozen years of dam removal. None match the scale of the demolition project on the Elwha or the grandeur of the reclamation to take place.

Before the river was blocked to generate power for a pulp mill, the Elwha was the storied home of epic fish runs and enormous fish. In due time, the Elwha is expected to be repopulated with salmon and steelhead, Seattle Times reporter Linda Mapes recently explained.

Reviving the Elwha River is not inexpensive. Total cost tops \$350 million, and includes the expense of a new water system for the city of Port Angeles and a new hatchery and flood-protection levies on the Lower Elwha Tribes reservation.

Taxpayers are paying the cost of corners cut decades ago, including a charade of a hatchery system installed to make amends for shortcuts in dam permitting.

Efforts to remove the dams began with a push by the Elwha tribe. Others took up and sustained the charge, including environmental advocate American Rivers, which campaigned for the last money to get restoration of the river and fish runs launched.

As Amy Kober of American Rivers noted, this region will get to see "a river coming back to life before our eyes."

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