

IN 1956, AT THE TENDER AGE OF THIRTY-TWO, Frank Church made a bold bid for the United States Senate. After squeaking out a victory in the hotly contested Idaho Democratic primary, Church faced down incumbent Senator Herman Welker, receiving nearly 60 percent of the vote.

One issue that loomed over the campaign was an emerging dispute over building dams in the Snake River's Hells Canyon. While Church and other Democrats supported the construction of a high federal dam in the Idaho gorge, their Republican opponents favored developing the resource through private utility companies. Idaho voters split on the issue, and so, seeking to avoid a divisive debate, Church downplayed his position during the general election "because it was not a winning issue, politically."¹

Although Church won the election, he could not escape the issue. Indeed, his victory and subsequent assignment to the Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs put him at the center of a growing controversy about damming Hells Canyon. Over the next eighteen years, Church wrestled with balancing Idaho's demand for economic growth and his own pro-development beliefs with an emerging environmental movement's demand for preservation of nature—in Idaho and across the nation.

As he grappled with these competing interests, Church underwent a significant transformation. While Church often supported development early in his Senate career, he, like few others of his time, began to see the value of wild places and to believe that rivers offered more than power production opportunities and irrigation water. Characteristically for Church, his move away from damming Hells Canyon was methodical rather than rash, the thoughtful result of his deepening appreciation for the role of dams in the larger environmental picture.

Hells Canyon, North America's deepest gorge, cradles the Snake River and defines the northern portion of Oregon's border with Idaho. Though it winds for more than a thousand miles, the Snake River is most spectacular here. In Nez Percé legend, Coyote dug Hells Canyon to protect his people in the Blue Mountains from the Seven Devils in Idaho. It is an awesome moat. At its deepest, Hells Canyon plunges seventy-nine hundred feet from rim to river, over two thousand feet deeper than the Grand Canyon. In June 1806, members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition became the first whites to see the spectacle. Later, in the 1830s, United States Army Captain Benjamin L. E. Bonneville wrote of his encounter with Hells Canyon: "Nothing we had ever gazed upon in any other region could for a moment compare in wild majesty and impressive sternness with the series of scenes which here at every turn astonished our senses and filled us with awe and delight."²

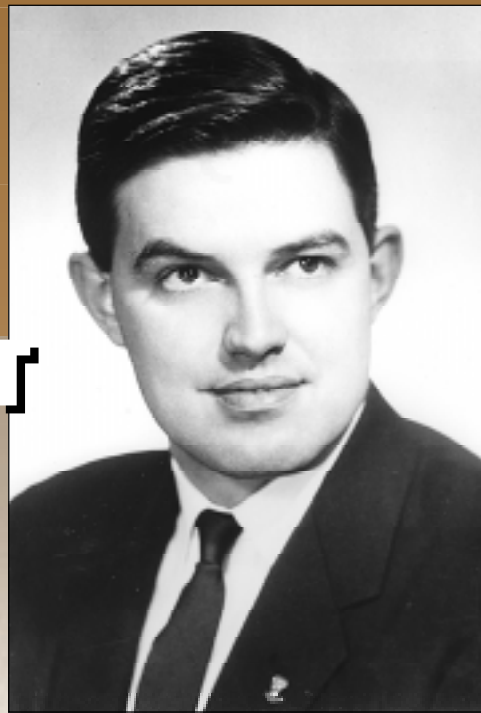
Carrying nearly twice the volume of the Colorado River, the Snake was also home to impressive salmon runs; at the time of the Hells Canyon controversy the Snake produced nearly 40 percent of all the salmon and steelhead in the Columbia River Basin.³ Significantly, in 1956 the Hells Canyon gorge contained the last free-flowing stretch of the Middle Snake River, the stretch of the Snake that begins at the confluence of the Snake and Boise rivers at Nyssa, Oregon, and runs to the confluence of the Snake and Clearwater rivers at Lewiston, Idaho. The fight over the development or preservation of the 110-mile free-flowing stretch in Hells Canyon spanned two decades and forever changed Frank Church.

EVOLUTION of an Senator Frank Church

ENVIRONMENTALIST

and the Hells Canyon Controversy

by Sara E. Dant Ewert



When he won election to the United States Senate in 1956, Frank Church of Idaho (above, 1956) was an avid supporter of public development of hydroelectric power. Gradually Church's position changed, and in 1973 he cosponsored legislation to prevent the construction of new dams in Hells Canyon (left, circa 1940) and to preserve the last free-flowing section of the Middle Snake River.

The Hells Canyon dam controversy actually began some years before Church joined the Senate in 1957. During the New Deal, the federal government had committed massive funding to water projects like the Tennessee Valley Authority. As part of this legacy, in 1947 the Army Corps of Engineers completed a Senate-directed survey that outlined development possibilities in the Columbia River system, of which the Snake River is a major tributary. For the Middle Snake River, they proposed two immense dams: one just downstream from the mouth of the Salmon River, called the Nez Perce site; and a second farther upstream at Hells Canyon Creek, which they simply called the Hells Canyon site. While interagency rivalry often caused the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Reclamation to oppose Army Corps of Engineers proposals, the bureau's own studies from the previous year had recommended building dams at both sites.⁴

Opposition to the dams came from the Idaho Power Company. Idaho Power by virtue of its ownership of a small, and largely abandoned, six-hundred-kilowatt power plant beside the river held claim to a dam site that would have been flooded if the federal dams were built. Resurrecting its claim to the land, in June 1947 Idaho Power filed with the Federal Power Commission—the federal licensing agency that had since 1920 authorized dam construction throughout the country—for a preliminary permit to build a low dam on this site, known as Oxbow.⁵

In its final construction-permit application for the Oxbow Dam, submitted in December 1950, Idaho Power also proposed a series of dams in Hells Canyon

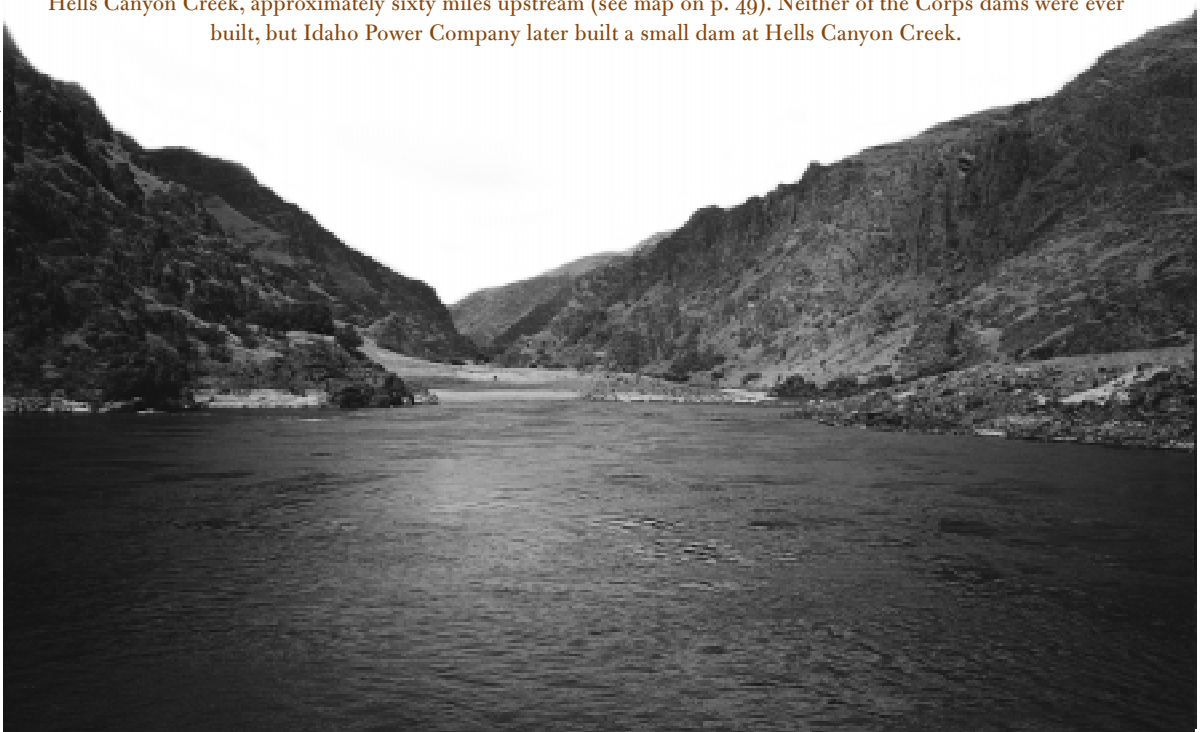
above Hells Canyon Creek that would in combination utilize the same six-hundred-foot “head” as the high federal dam proposed for the Hells Canyon Creek site.⁶ Thus a private, competitive alternative to federal development emerged.

At the heart of the Hells Canyon conflict between Idaho Power and the federal government was the larger issue of who should control the hydroelectric generating potential of the country's rivers: private corporations or the public, through their government. Committed to the ideal of public ownership, Senator Wayne Morse (D-Oregon) and Idaho Congresswoman Gracie Pfof (D) in 1952 introduced legislation drafted by the Department of the Interior's legal staff that advocated building a high federal dam at Hells Canyon Creek. A true behemoth, the proposed dam would rise 720 feet from foundation to crest. Just 6 feet lower than Hoover Dam on the Colorado River, the Hells Canyon Dam would have been the second highest dam in the world at the time and cost approximately \$300 million. The reservoir behind the dam would have held 4.4 million acre-feet of water while creating ninety-three miles of slack water upstream.⁷

Idaho Power had no intention of abandoning its plans, however, and it acquired a valuable ally in the November 1952 election of Republican Dwight Eisenhower as president. Seeking to make a definitive break with the Democratic past, Eisenhower's first State of the Union address indicated his administration would favor private hydroelectric power development over federal dams. With this blessing, in May 1953 Idaho Power filed two more construction-permit applications with the Federal Power Commission for dams to

In 1947 the Army Corps of Engineers proposed the construction of two immense dams on the Snake River: one at the Nez Perce site just downstream from the Snake's confluence with the Salmon (pictured below) and the other at Hells Canyon Creek, approximately sixty miles upstream (see map on p. 49). Neither of the Corps dams were ever built, but Idaho Power Company later built a small dam at Hells Canyon Creek.

Courtesy the author





complement the Oxbow Dam. One was for a low dam at the Hells Canyon Creek site, the other for a low dam at Brownlee, approximately twenty river miles south, and upriver, from the Oxbow site. Hearings on Idaho Power's three-dam proposal began in July 1953 and lasted a full year. In the meantime, the Morse-Pfost proposal for a high federal dam found little support in Congress.⁸

Two years later, in August 1955, persistence paid off as the Federal Power Commission approved Idaho Power's three-dam proposal. In an attempt to block construction at the Brownlee site, opponents of private hydroelectric power development filed an appeal with the United States Court of Appeals in Washington, D.C., accusing the Federal Power Commission of "an act of administrative lawlessness" and "violence to the federal comprehensive plans for the Columbia River basin." The appeal failed, and in 1958 Brownlee Dam began producing power. Though Idaho Power

Conflict over Hells Canyon originally centered on who should control hydroelectric generation—private corporations or the public. Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower favored private development, and his election to the presidency in 1952 paved the way for the Federal Power Commission to approve Idaho Power Company's proposal for three dams: Brownlee, Oxbow, and Hells Canyon. The Brownlee Dam, shown at left during construction (circa 1956), began producing power in 1958.

intended to follow this success with construction of the dams at Oxbow and Hells Canyon Creek, the federal dam proposal did not die, and at the center of the fight for a federal Hells Canyon dam was Senator Frank Church.⁹

Church emerged solidly in favor of the federal Hells Canyon high dam proposal. As a liberal, New Deal-style Democrat, he would later support legislation leading to the construction of Dworshak, Teton, and Spangler dams in Idaho. Dams, Church believed, were "indispensable if Idaho was to grow and prosper," and in his 1956 campaign, he argued that "anyone who knows Idaho, knows water is our lifeblood." John A. Carver, Church's administrative assistant from 1957 to 1961, observed that "the people of Idaho universally believed that the right to use water—whether for mining, or for irrigation, or for energy—was a valuable property right, akin to the ownership of real property itself." And Church sought to convince his constituents that the federal government, and not private utility companies, was the best agent for protecting these water "property" rights. We must not, he argued, "stunt our growth with small plans for small tomorrows."¹⁰

1. LeRoy Ashby and Rod Gramer, *Fighting the Odds: The Life of Senator Frank Church* (Pullman, Wash., 1994), 58; Frank Church, interview by Rod Gramer, January 10, 1979, MS 173, Frank Church Papers, Boise State University Library, Boise State University, Boise, Idaho (hereafter Church Papers).

2. William Ashworth, *Hells Canyon, the Deepest Gorge on Earth* (New York, 1977), xiv, 3, 11; U.S. Forest Service, *Voices from Hells Canyon*, program 2 (Hells Canyon Dam Visitor Center, Idaho), video; Boyd Norton, *Snake Wilderness* (San Francisco, 1972), 23.

3. Ashworth, *Hells Canyon*, xv; Elmer F. Bennett to Jerome K. Kuykendall, November 21, 1960, p. 4, file 22, box 155, category 1.1, MS 56, Church Papers.

4. *Congressional Record* [June 19, 1956], 84th Cong., 2d sess., 1956, vol. 102, pt. 8:10556, also in p. 13, file 12, box 108, category 1.1, MS 56, Church Papers.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 10 in Church Papers copy. The result of the consolidation of more than fifty small utilities, the private Idaho Power

Company served all of southern Idaho and parts of northern Nevada and eastern Oregon.

6. *Head* is a term for the number of feet a river drops between two points and is used to measure the river's potential to generate hydroelectric power.

7. *Congressional Record* [June 19, 1956], p. 8 in Church Papers copy.

8. Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1953 State of the Union Address, <http://www.interlink-cafe.com/uspresidents/1953.htm>. The Brownlee Dam replaced three earlier proposed dams, reducing the total number of Idaho Power Company dams from five to three: Oxbow, low Hells Canyon at the Hells Canyon Creek site, and Brownlee.

9. Ashworth, *Hells Canyon*, 80-85, 94; *Congressional Record* [June 19, 1956], p. 10 in Church Papers copy. By the late 1970s, Brownlee Dam alone served more than half of Idaho and produced more than 60 percent of the power generated in the state. Randy Stapilus, *Paradox Politics: People and Power in Idaho* (Boise, Idaho, 1988), 292.



In spite of federal go-ahead for an Idaho Power dam at Hells Canyon Creek, Church supported the construction of a federal high dam at the same location because he saw the monopolistic nature of private dams as an assault on public water rights. He did not prevail, and the Idaho Power Company completed the low Hells Canyon Dam, shown at left under construction, in 1967.

To Church, the monopolistic nature of Idaho Power's proposed dams constituted an assault on Idaho's water rights, and the senator chose the Hells Canyon controversy as the subject of his first major floor speech in the Senate. In his carefully worded speech on June 19, 1957, Church proposed that the dam controversy was a test of the government's ability to fend off private development of the nation's water resources. The real issue, Church said, was the protection of the public interest, which was not the goal of private utilities. But from the start, Church was very clear about the necessity of resource development in the Northwest.

We have canyons that cut, like a giant's trough, so deep that the river they channel lies in the shadow through most of a summer day. And there are unique dam sites in these canyons which call for dams big enough to match their great dimensions.¹¹

Church also insisted that private dams did not necessarily save taxpayers money: "The Idaho Power Company is engaged in just one business—the sale of electricity for profit." In a detailed statistical analysis, Church demonstrated the superiority of federally funded water projects over private development and argued that Idaho Power's dams would cost taxpayers an additional \$28.5 million more than a federal dam at Hells Canyon Creek. Beyond this higher cost, the senator continued, consumers would pay higher prices for electricity. If arguments against the high dam were ac-

cepted, Church warned, they would later be used to block other federal projects with the result that "much of our precious water will be wasted, and the future growth of the West itself imperiled." The Hells Canyon Dam legislation, Church concluded, was "a bill that serves no interest, save the people's interest. It is a good bill. It should pass."¹²

The bill's principal sponsor, Wayne Morse, called the speech "the keenest analysis of the Hells Canyon Dam issue which has ever been made on the floor of the Senate," and Church himself said later, "[I] left the floor thinking that I had made a very major contribution to the winning of this battle."¹³ Church's statements also won rave reviews from the National Hells Canyon Association, a coalition of groups opposed to private hydroelectric power development, which wrote in June 1958 to express "thanks and deep appreciation for your [Church's] constant efforts to secure authorization of Hells Canyon Dam."¹⁴

Church soon discovered, however, that the battle was only beginning. Though the bill passed the Senate by a 45-38 majority in June 1957, it died in subcommittee in the House.¹⁵ The previous year, the appeals court had ruled in favor of Idaho Power's dam petitions. Now, with the federal proposal moribund in Congress, Idaho Power proceeded with construction without the threat of federal competition. The Brownlee Dam was completed in 1958, the Oxbow Dam in 1961, and the low Hells Canyon Dam at the Hells Canyon Creek site in 1967.

10. Frank Church, *Build Your Idaho* (1956), campaign video, video 5600, box 1, category 11.1, MS 56, Church Papers; John Carver, *The Legacy of Frank Church*, p. 1, <http://sspa.boisestate.edu/legacy.html>.

11. *Congressional Record* [June 19, 1957], 85th Cong., 1st. sess., 1957, pt. 7:9655, also in pp. 1, 3, file 15, box 3, MS 124, Fred Hutchinson Papers, Boise State University Library, Boise State University, Boise, Idaho (hereafter Hutchinson Papers).

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Congressional Record* [June 19, 1957], pp. 4, 5, 13 in Hutchinson Papers copy; Paige E. Mulhollan, *Transcript, Frank Church Oral History Interview* (Austin, Tex., 1969), 5. In April 1957 the Office of Defense Mobilization approved rapid write off tax amortization certificates for Idaho Power's three proposed dams. Church explained that the \$28.5 million difference between federal and private development of Hells Canyon was the result of these certificates.



Idaho Power Company sited Oxbow Dam at the upstream end of an oxbow in the Snake River (lower right in the preconstruction photograph above). A temporary cofferdam across the river and tunnel through the narrowest part of the oxbow diverted water around the damsite during building. Failure of a fish trap at the lower end of the tunnel resulted in the tragic “Oxbow Incident,” a fish kill that one historian called “one of the greatest anadromous fish disasters in history.”

In 1958 Church sought a new tactic. He had already begun to develop a style that would become in some ways the hallmark of his Senate career—a style marked by the art of compromise. The previous year, Church had suggested the idea of a moratorium on dam building in Hells Canyon to stall the Idaho Power Company so that hearings could be convened and further study made on the best development option for this valuable resource. In 1957 the moratorium interested few people; but a tragic event, known as the “Oxbow Incident,” drove people to Church’s proposal and, incidentally, contributed to Church’s changing perception of the costs and benefits of dams.

The Oxbow Incident involved the Idaho Power Company’s failed attempt to transport salmon around the Oxbow Dam, then under construction, in an effort to maintain viable salmon runs, an obligation stipulated in their development permit. The sheer size of the dam,

205 feet in height, presented a formidable obstacle to the spawning fish, but the expense of trucking and building traps and ladders soured Idaho Power on the goal. Disaster struck the fall 1958 chinook salmon and steelhead run when trap failure, the isolation of most of the year’s run in an unaerated pool below the dam, and poor organization—which led to fish being caught on the Idaho side of the river while the transport trucks sat on the Oregon side—led to what one historian called “one of the greatest anadromous fish disasters in history.” According to a 1958 United States Fish and Wildlife Service report on the Oxbow Incident, approximately 4,000 adult chinook salmon and steelhead died at the dam site and “50 percent of the 14,000 salmon which were collected and transported around the project did not survive to spawn. The success of the 3,700 steelhead trout which were passed remains to be determined.” In addition to the environmental

He estimated the nonreimbursable costs of the federal Hells Canyon high dam to be \$55 million, while the “cost to the Treasury in added interest charges resulting from the rapid tax writeoff privileges that have been awarded Idaho Power will be \$83 million.” *Congressional Record* [June 19, 1957], pp. 4, 5, 13 in Hutchinson Papers copy.

14. J. T. Marr to Frank Church, June 17, 1958, file 13, box 68, category 1.1, MS 56, Church Papers.

15. The architect of the bill’s demise in the House was John Saylor (R-Pennsylvania), future father of the 1964 Wilderness Act. A good

Republican, Saylor supported private enterprise over federal intervention, but Saylor also believed that Idaho Power’s low dam would do less environmental damage than the high federal dam. Ashworth, *Hells Canyon*, 101-2.

16. *Ibid.*, 117-18; U.S. Department of the Interior Fish and Wildlife Service (hereafter Fish and Wildlife Service), *A Report on Recent Fish Passage Problems at Oxbow and Brownlee Dams—Snake River* (n.p., December 1958), 7, also in file 18, box 155, category 1.1, MS 56, Church Papers.

When the fish trap downstream from the Oxbow Dam construction site failed, workers breached the temporary cofferdam, allowing water to follow the river's natural course, in order to repair the trap. With nothing to stop their upstream progress, most of the 1958 salmon and steelhead run piled into a pool below the breach. Despite efforts to catch and transport the fish around the obstacle, a huge proportion did not survive. Many died in the pool (right, October 8, 1958); more died in transport. Below, dam workers pack cleaned fish in ice to take to nearby Idaho and Oregon welfare agencies.



Both photographs Oregon Historical Society, Portland



catastrophe, “the monetary loss from their failure to spawn was literally incalculable.”¹⁶

The drama of the death of thousands of salmon drew national attention to the shortcomings of dam technology and began attracting support for Church’s moratorium idea, though several years passed before a formal proposal appeared in Congress. Strengthening the case for a moratorium, the Fish and Wildlife Service report on the Oxbow Incident concluded that “these losses could have been avoided” and that “there is little justification for sacrificing this valuable living fish resource to a desire to expedite . . . hydroelectric power development.”¹⁷

The next year, when the Army Corps of Engineers opened hearings on the revision of their original 1947

development plan for the Columbia River system, they drew an audience with a clear concern for “the fish problem.”¹⁸ These 1959 hearings sought public comment on two competing proposals for additional development in Hells Canyon. The first, formally filed with the Federal Power Commission in March 1958, involved the private Pacific Northwest Power Company’s plan to construct a dam at the High Mountain Sheep site, just above the confluence of the Salmon and Snake rivers.

The second proposal, formally filed in March 1960 by the Washington Public Power Supply System, reiterated interest in building a dam at the Nez Perce site located just below the confluence of the Salmon and Snake rivers. Notably, if a dam were built at the Nez Perce site, it would drown the High Mountain Sheep site and block salmon access to both the Salmon and the Snake. Though a minority voice, a significant preservationist sentiment emerged during the 1959 Lewiston, Idaho, hearings when the eastern Oregon chapters of the Izaak Walton League, a sportsman conservationist organization, refused to endorse their national organization’s support of a dam at the High Mountain Sheep site and instead condemned both projects.¹⁹

Finally, in June 1962 the government joined the fray when Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall recommended a federal dam at the High Mountain Sheep site.

17. Fish and Wildlife Service, *A Report on Recent Fish Passage Problems*, 9.

18. For example, see Lewiston, Idaho, *Tribune*, November 15, 1959.

19. *Congressional Record* [May 15, 1970], 91st Cong., 2d sess., 1970, vol. 116, p. 15680, also in file 9, box 12, category 7.9, MS 56, Church Papers; Ashworth, *Hells Canyon*, 119.

20. Ashworth, *Hells Canyon*, 119-31.

21. *Congressional Record* [May 15, 1970], 15680; Ashworth, *Hells Canyon*, 133.

22. James Nathan Miller, “America the (Formerly) Beautiful,” *Reader’s Digest*, February 1969, 181; Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955–1985* (Cambridge, U.K., 1987), 1-6. See also, for example, Donald Jackson, “Threatened America,” *Life*, August 1, 1969, 32-43.

23. *Udall v FPC*, 387 US 428, June 5, 1967.

This brought the total to three development proposals for the Middle Snake: one by a private utility, one by a public utility, and one by the federal government. Both Washington Public Power and Pacific Northwest Power were outraged at the threat of federal competition. Meanwhile, the Columbia River Salmon and Tuna Packers' Association organized in 1960 to oppose the giant dam proposals.²⁰

In October 1962, the Federal Power Commission ruled in favor of the Pacific Northwest Power Company's High Mountain Sheep proposal as the most suitable for providing "the best comprehensive development which would avoid fish passage problems to the Salmon River." The decision included no comment from the fisheries interests. But by then, as one historian noted, "the upper Snake [salmon] runs were dead, and with them any real hope of ever attaining fish passage over high dams."²¹

Almost as a formality, both the Washington Public Power Supply System and the Department of the Interior appealed the commission's ruling, arguing that the decision to award the license to a private company over two public agencies was contrary to the public interest and a violation of the public-preference clause in the Federal Power Act. Though Pacific Northwest Power had completed most of the geologic surveys at the High Mountain Sheep site by 1966, the company chose to delay actual construction until their opponents exhausted the appeals process.

As the case wound its way through the legal maze of the courts, public sentiment favoring what historian Samuel Hays called "quality of life" issues began to emerge. As education and income levels rose following World War II, environmental quality became an integral part of Americans' sense of the good life and a measure of a higher standard of living. Even the normally conservative *Reader's Digest* lamented the im-

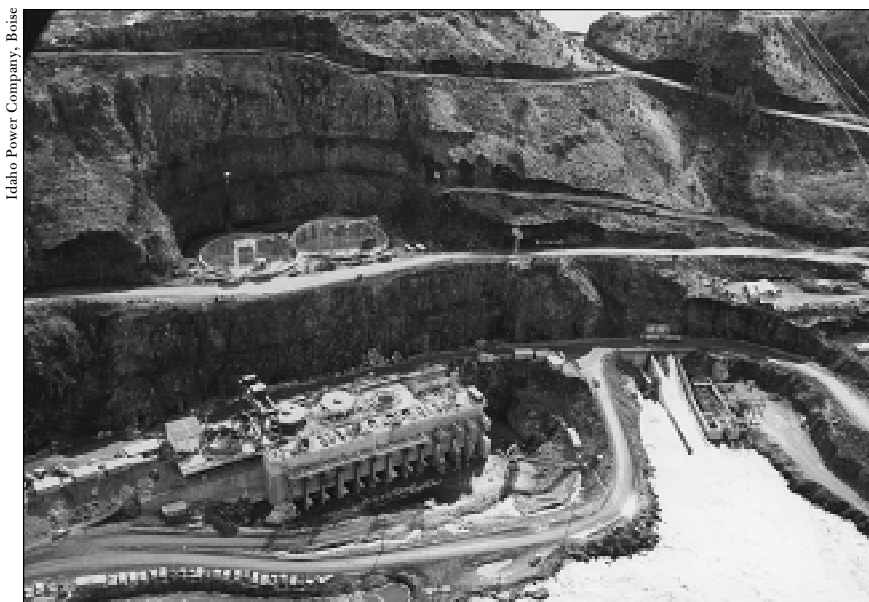
pending loss of Hells Canyon to "narrow-interest decisions that block any overall look at what we are doing to the land." Environmental concerns squarely entered the Hells Canyon debate when the Supreme Court issued a bombshell ruling on the Pacific Northwest Power proposed dam at the High Mountain Sheep site.²²

In June 1967 the Supreme Court remanded the appealed case to the Federal Power Commission, sending it back with the charge that they consider a fourth option in Hells Canyon. Writing for the majority, Justice William O. Douglas challenged the commission to consider whether the best dam might be no dam. The test, he argued, was not

solely whether the region will be able to use the additional power. The test is whether the project will be in the public interest. And that determination can be made only after an exploration of all issues relevant to the "public interest," including future power demand and supply, alternate sources of power, the public interest in preserving reaches of wild rivers and wilderness areas, the preservation of anadromous fish for commercial and recreational purposes, and the protection of wildlife.²³

Thus the Supreme Court dramatically refocused the Hells Canyon debate and formally recognized the value of a wild river for a reason other than its potential as a power source.

Growing public concern for environmental quality certainly had swayed the court, and at the vanguard of shifting attitudes toward the value of free-flowing rivers was Frank Church. In the eight years prior to the court's decision, Church had begun to reconsider fundamentally his position on dams in general, not just private dams. As Church later recalled, the early Hells Canyon controversy "was not about whether or not a dam would be built but rather where it would be built



Idaho Power Company, Boise

The disastrous fish kill at Oxbow Dam (whose powerhouse is shown at left) contributed to Church's changing perception of the costs and benefits of dams. Church was not alone, and in the 1960s a growing public concern for environmental protection emerged.



Courtesy the author

Recognition of the value of free-flowing rivers shifted the dam debate from “where and who should build it” to whether dams should be built at all. Reflecting his growing concern, Church introduced bills to prohibit licensing of all dams on the Salmon River that would flood spawning grounds. Above, rafters enter Snow Hole Rapid on the lower Salmon. Recreation is an additional benefit of the undammed “River of No Return.”

and who should build it.” But the Oxbow Incident had revealed the toll dams took on fisheries. And the proposed Nez Perce Dam threatened to block Idaho’s famous “River of No Return”—the Salmon—home to 30 percent of the total anadromous fish spawn in the Columbia Basin and more half of all its spring and summer chinook.²⁴ This was a price Church thought too high. Thus, in 1959, and again in January 1960, Church introduced a Salmon River Preservation Bill to prohibit the licensing of all dams on the Salmon River that would flood established spawning grounds.²⁵

In language that reflected his emerging appreciation for the impact of dams on the salmon population, Church observed that while the low dams downstream from the mouth of the Salmon River permitted fish passage, they also took a toll that experts predicted would “seriously endanger the anadromous fish runs.” Arguing that a prohibition on additional dams would have no detrimental effect on the economy or growth of either Idaho or the Northwest, Church declared:

For many years to come, we have sufficient damsites available on our other major rivers to provide all of the water storage, the power, the flood control, and the navigational benefits that the growing needs of the Northwest may require.

Promising to “exert every effort to secure the bill’s passage,” Church urged the Senate “to save the river in its pristine state” until human technology solved the “fish problem.”²⁶

The fish problem was very real. In January 1961 the Idaho State Department of Fish and Game compiled a report that detailed the impact of dams on salmon. The results were stunning: over 50 percent fewer fall chinook reached the spawning grounds on the Middle Snake in 1958 and 1959 as compared to 1957, and downstream migrant salmon and steelhead suffered mortality rates as high as 78 percent in 1959. In addition, Fish and Game reported the “apparent failure of most of the million fall chinook downstream migrants estimated to have entered the Brownlee Reservoir in 1959 to either

24. Frank Church to Gentlemen, May 1, 1959, p. 1, file 28, box 2, MS 124, Hutchinson Papers.

25. Frank Church, “Hells Canyon National Recreation Area Dedication,” July 20, 1976, p. 1, file 8, box 5, category 2.3, MS 56, Church Papers; *Congressional Record* [January 19, 1960], 86th Cong., 2d sess., 1960, vol. 106, pt. 1: 727, also in p. 1, file 28, box 2, MS 124, Hutchinson Papers.

26. *Congressional Record* [January 19, 1960], p. 1 in Hutchinson Papers copy.

27. Ross Leonard to Governor Robert E. Smylie, January 24, 1961, p. 2, file 28, box 2, MS 124, Hutchinson Papers. The causes for the

dramatic losses to the salmon and steelhead populations were many. The completion of two new dams on the Columbia River (downstream from the Snake) further complicated fish passage; the fish trap at Brownlee Dam malfunctioned in fall 1957; the Oxbow Incident substantially affected survival rates in 1958; downstream migration facilities at both Brownlee and Oxbow failed in 1957 and 1958 during the height of the downstream migration; and thousands of smolts died as they passed through the turbines. Ross Leffler to Frank Church, October 27, 1959, file 19, box 155, MS 56, category 1.1, Church Papers.

In addition to damaging fisheries and flooding recreational white water, the construction of more dams on the Middle Snake River would have flooded more than two hundred important Native American sites in Hells Canyon, including the petroglyphs in the photograph at right.



Idaho State Historical Society, Boise

pass through the reservoir or to be attracted to and trapped by the artificial outlets or skimmers.”²⁷

Not surprisingly, Church’s Salmon River Preservation Bill generated significant public response. The Federal Power Commission opposed the measure, stating the bill would “prevent the balancing of these adverse effects on fish against the overall benefits to navigation, flood control and power generation.” Private power companies also opposed the proposal as “not in the public interest of the development of the Columbia and Snake River Watershed.”²⁸ And the conservative Ralph W. Hunter from the Meridian, Idaho, *New Times* demanded that “this farce of considering fish more important than electric power be stopped” or else “power customers will pay millions of dollars for comparative handful of fish in two tiny creeks.”²⁹ But a significant collection of supporters rallied to the bill’s defense. The Southern Idaho Fish and Game Association gave full endorsement to Church’s plan to “preserve this valuable and irreplaceable resource,” and in February 1961, the Washington state legislature passed a resolution in support of the measure.³⁰

When Church’s Salmon River Preservation Bill failed to pass the Senate by 1963, he decided to change his tactics. In March 1965 he introduced the National Wild Rivers Bill, designed to protect sections of six of the nation’s scenic rivers from economic development.

Dams, Church said, would not be allowed on these rivers. Growing public sentiment in favor of scenic land preservation, Church contended, had created “a groundswell of public concern for the fate of these majestic streams, many of them threatened by dams which would forever destroy their beauty and ecology.” He warned that “if we fail to give these rivers, which are assets of unique and incomparable value, statutory protection now, while there is still time, we shall have only ourselves to blame later, when time has run out.” Fully supported by the Johnson administration, the bill protected parts of the Salmon and Clearwater rivers of Idaho and became law in 1968 as the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.³¹

Church’s change of heart had many sources. In addition to the 1958 Oxbow Incident, Church, as well as the nation, saw the three Idaho Power dams on the Snake flood recreational white water one outfitter called “comparable in many ways to the Grand Canyon itself.” In addition, Church recognized other concerns. Archaeologists had noted that further dam development on the Snake threatened more than two hundred important Native American sites, and ongoing studies revealed the importance of the canyon floor as winter range for deer and elk herds.³²

Furthermore, Church believed by now that most of his constituents were willing to support environmen-

28. Federal Power Commission, *Report on S. 2586*, 86th Cong., 1st sess., February 26, 1960, also in p. 3, file 28, box 2, MS 124, Hutchinson Papers; Herbert G. West to Frank Church, December 11, 1959, file 20, box 155, category 1.1, MS 56, Church Papers; Annual Meeting of Inland Empire Waterways Association, *Resolution No. 24*, November 3, 1959, *ibid.*

29. Ralph W. Hunter to Frank Church, December 1959, telegram, file 20, box 155, category 1.1, MS 56, Church Papers.

30. Senate Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, *Statement of Southern Idaho Fish and Game Association with Respect to Senate Bill S. 2586*, 86th Cong., 2d sess., November 12, 1959, also

in file 20, box 155, category 1.1, MS 56, Church Papers; Washington State House of Representatives, *Resolution*, March 1, 1961, also in file 28, box 2, MS 124, Hutchinson Papers.

31. *Congressional Record* [January 17, 1966], p. 389, in file 6, box 14, category 7.9, MS 56, Church Papers. As passed in 1968, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act actually protected eight rivers: the Rio Grande (Colorado, New Mexico, Texas), the Rogue (Oregon), the middle fork of the Clearwater (Idaho), the middle fork of the Salmon (Idaho), the Saint Croix (Minnesota, Wisconsin), the Wolf (Wisconsin), the Eleven Point (Missouri), and the middle fork of the Feather (California). It also designated twenty-seven other rivers for detailed study as potential additions to the national system.

tal legislation as long as they did not view it as a threat to their livelihoods. "If it is really a choice of conservation or their job, they'll take their job; but as long as it is sensible conservation and propaganda about loss of their jobs that they can sort out, they'll take conservation." In his statement supporting the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Bill, Church acknowledged the growing value of tourism and recreation, at the time the third most important source of revenue in his state. As population continued to expand, he argued, so too would the demand for outdoor recreation: "The great majority of Americans will be more affluent and have more time for recreation."³³ Thus, having successfully prevented dams on the Salmon, in 1968 Church publicly began to voice his concerns over new proposals to dam the Middle Snake, a major redirection for him that reflected a similar shift in the country.

Still hoping to secure a dam license during the remanded Federal Power Commission proceedings, the privately owned Pacific Northwest Power Company had joined forces with Washington Public Power Supply System in an odd partnership to apply in September 1967 for joint development of the Middle Snake. Their new project: a 670-foot-tall High Mountain Sheep Dam. The autumn 1968 Federal Power Commission hearings on the new proposal brought strong opposition from the Department of the Interior, which feared further destruction of anadromous fish runs and spawning grounds. Instead, the department spoke in favor of federal construction of two new dams farther upstream, above the Snake-Imnaha confluence, at the Appaloosa and Low Mountain Sheep sites. By fall 1968, however, when neither proposal seemed to adequately address the fish problem, the Lewiston, Idaho, *Tribune* began editorializing in favor of preserving the gorge and in opposition to dams.³⁴

On the grass-roots level, popular concern over the urgent threats to the nation's unique places, a core focus of the 1960s environmental movement, had aided in the formation of preservation advocacy groups for the Snake River gorge. In June 1967, for example, hard on the heels of the Supreme Court ruling temporarily blocking construction of Pacific Northwest Power's High Mountain Sheep Dam, the Hells Canyon Preservation Council had formed with the ambitious goal

of preventing any further dam construction on the Middle Snake.

Recognizing the need to form a coalition with sportsmen and realizing that outdoor enthusiasts might view a national park designation as too restrictive, the Hells Canyon Preservation Council articulated in September 1967 the concept of creating the Hells Canyon-Snake National River as a de facto national park that would allow hunting. By early 1968 such groups as the Idaho Wildlife Federation lent their support to the national river concept, rescinding their earlier advocacy for a private dam at the High Mountain Sheep site.³⁵

But by 1968, even as the Federal Power Commission opened hearings on this latest round of development proposals, the real battle for control of Hells Canyon shifted to Congress. In September, Church cosponsored with Len Jordan (R-Idaho) a bill creating a ten-year moratorium on further dam building on the Middle Snake. Church now believed the moratorium would buy time for canyon preservationists to build a case to ban dams in Hells Canyon altogether. As he wrote to one constituent: "I am presently persuaded that the construction of a high hydroelectric dam in the Middle Snake would not contribute greatly to the development of Idaho." And in a "Dear Friend" form letter, Church stated that "if preservation of the river in its natural state is the highest use—and I incline to that view—the moratorium should buy the required time to prove the case."³⁶

Senator Jordan, a former Hells Canyon sheep rancher and avid supporter of Idaho Power's three-dam plan as governor from 1950 to 1954, sponsored the moratorium because he believed time would prove the necessity of a dam at the seemingly defunct Nez Perce site, though as a reclamation dam primarily for irrigation, not power. Jordan believed the irrigation potential of Idaho's rivers was vital to the state's economy and promoted the rigorous development of water resources. Of their alliance on the moratorium, Church commented: "He understood my position. I understood his. It happened to serve both our purposes at the time to vote for a moratorium."³⁷

32. Tim Palmer, *Endangered Rivers and the Conservation Movement* (Berkeley, Calif., 1986), 67. See also Mike Wetherell to Bill Ashworth, October 5, 1976, p. 4, file 2, box 153, category 1.1, MS 56, Church Papers; and Bennett to Kuykendall, November 21, 1960, pp. 5-6, Church Papers. Stating his opposition to the Nez Perce site, Secretary of the Interior Bennett noted that "there does not appear to be any feasible means of mitigating wildlife losses." Bennett to Kuykendall, November 21, 1960, pp. 5-6, Church Papers. On Church's opposition to dams, see Lewiston, Idaho, *Morning Tribune*, May 24, 1968.

33. Carol Payne and Margaret Carpenter, *Ralph Nader Congress Project: Citizens Look at Congress: Frank Church, Democratic Senator from Idaho* (n.p., 1972), 15, also in file 15, box 4, category 10.6, MS 56, Church Papers; *Congressional Record* [January 17, 1966], p. 8 in Church Papers copy.

34. *Congressional Record* [May 15, 1970], 15680. For editorials denouncing the damming of the Middle Snake, see, for example, Lewiston, Idaho, *Tribune*, November 9, 1968.

35. Ashworth, *Hells Canyon*, 152.

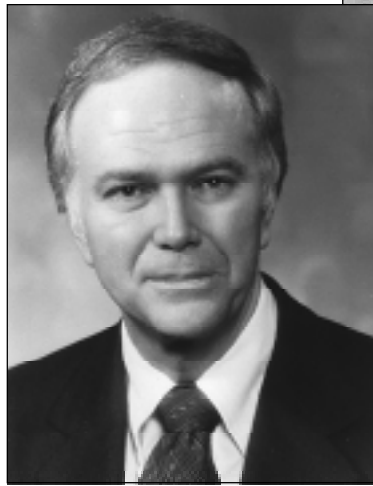


In 1968 Idaho senators Church (near right) and Len Jordan (far right) cosponsored a bill placing a ten-year moratorium on dam building on the Middle Snake River. Many preservationists opposed the moratorium because it precluded permanent protection of the river. In response, they recruited Oregon senator Bill Packwood (below) to propose legislation to preserve the Snake. Both the moratorium and the Packwood bill failed.



Boise State University Library, Boise, Idaho

Hells Canyon preservationists, fearing that the moratorium might further Jordan’s aim of developing the Nez Perce site, lined up to oppose the bill. In their view, the moratorium did little to aid canyon preservation, prevented the addition of the Middle Snake to the growing list of rivers to be protected under the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, and failed to halt riverside development and commercialization.³⁸



U.S. Senate Historical Office, Washington, D.C.

Dam proponents also found the moratorium unsavory, and, in a remarkable turn of events, Pacific Northwest Power and Washington Public Power Supply System began courting Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall to join them in a triple alliance to build the High Mountain Sheep Dam. The ploy was obvious. If Interior could secure congressional authorization for the dam, the three partners could bypass the cumbersome Federal Power Commission licensing requirement. Udall accepted, but the triple alliance announced their plans on November 5, 1969, just three days after Richard Nixon had won the presidency, making Udall a lame duck and thus thwarting the scheme.³⁹

In 1969, to their utmost surprise, preservationists gained an unexpected ally in the Nixon administration with the appointment of Walter Hickel as secretary of the interior. Hickel, a classic laissez-faire Republican, wasted little time in declaring his intention to oppose federal support for the High Mountain Sheep Dam pro-

posal, and after a rafting trip through Hells Canyon, even recommended the Federal Power Commission—which had not yet ruled on the case remanded to it by the Supreme Court—consider the Middle Snake for inclusion in the national Wild and Scenic Rivers system. The no-dam proposal continued to gain momentum.⁴⁰

The political climate now seemed optimum for the Hells Canyon Preservation Council to introduce their Hells Canyon–Snake National River Bill, which would preserve the Middle Snake River and its banks from dams and development by managing the area for recreation and environmental stability, while—in a politically expedient compromise—continuing to allow existing uses such as ranching and jet boating. Instinctively, they turned to Church as a sponsor. But as Pete Henault, head of the council, bitterly recalled, “Church said, ‘No, the time isn’t right.’”⁴¹

Church’s administrative assistant Mike Wetherell later explained:

Senator Jordan and Senator Church had succeeded in forming a working relationship based upon a

36. Frank Church to Don Geary, December 23, 1968, file 22, box 3, MS 124, Hutchinson Papers; Frank Church to Dear Friend, October 1969, *ibid.* Jordan entered the Senate in 1962 after the death of Henry Dworshak (R-Idaho). Jordan won the special election in 1962 by defeating former Congresswoman Gracie Pfost. A conservative Republican who began to moderate his stance by the end of the 1960s, Jordan won a full term in 1966. Boyd A. Martin, *Idaho Voting Trends: Party Realignment and Percentage of Votes for Candidates, Parties and Elections, 1890–1974* (Moscow, Idaho, 1975), 12.

37. Church interview, January 10, 1979, Church Papers.

38. Ashworth, *Hells Canyon*, 154. Interestingly, dam builders also opposed the moratorium. They feared other interests further upriver would make claims on Snake River water that would later make dams irrelevant. Pro-dam forces were especially wary of southwestern states like Arizona and California that coveted northwestern water.

39. *New York Times*, May 19, 1968; Ashworth, *Hells Canyon*, 155.

40. *Congressional Record* [May 15, 1970], 15680; Tim Palmer, *The Snake River: Window to the West* (Washington, D.C., 1991), 212.

41. Ashworth, *Hells Canyon*, 158–59.



In 1975 Church, Packwood, Idaho's James McClure, and Oregon's Mark Hatfield cosponsored the "Four Senators Bill" to save the Middle Snake from further development. Signed into law by President Gerald Ford, the act created the 662,000-acre Hells Canyon National Recreation Area, pictured above in a photograph taken from the Devil's Throne.

mutual respect for one another's views. Accordingly, the senator felt honor bound to support the moratorium approach so long as Senator Jordan remained in the Senate.

In addition, Church's adherence to the moratorium also guaranteed Jordan's support in Church's fight to preserve Idaho's Sawtooth Mountains as a national recreation area.⁴² While Church's insistence on honoring the moratorium typified his conciliatory politics, it was a vexing setback to the Hells Canyon Preservation Council.

Rejected by Church, the council turned to freshman senator Bob Packwood (R-Oregon) who leapt at the opportunity to sponsor the legislation: "I became convinced that beyond anything I had seen in this country, let alone in the state of Oregon, this was a place to save."⁴³ John Saylor (R-Pennsylvania), father of the 1964

Wilderness Act and one who had earlier helped kill the federal Hells Canyon Creek high dam proposal, sponsored the bill in the House. While the Church-Jordan moratorium bill passed the Senate in 1970, it failed in the House. The Packwood-Saylor Hells Canyon-Snake National River Bill could not even get a hearing.

The next year, 1971, Packwood determined to force the issue, even at the expense of alienating his Pacific Northwest colleagues.⁴⁴ As the national river bill remained bottled up in the Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs (a committee on which both Church and Jordan sat), Packwood quietly gathered twenty-six cosponsors and prepared for a coup: when the new moratorium bill came up for a vote on the Senate floor, he planned to propose an amendment to entirely replace the bill's text with the text of the Hells Canyon-Snake National River Bill.

42. Wetherell to Ashworth, October 5, 1976, p. 4, Church Papers.

43. Ashworth, *Hells Canyon*, 160.

44. Packwood realized that with both Church and Jordan on the Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, his national river proposal was doomed as long as the moratorium proposal remained viable.

45. Ashby and Gramer, *Fighting the Odds*, 352; Frank Church, Len Jordan, and Mark Hatfield to Joseph M. Montoya, June 23, 1971, file 21, box 3, MS 124, Hutchinson Papers; Portland, Oregon, *Oregonian*, June 26, 1971; Lewiston, Idaho, *Morning Tribune*, June 26, 1971.

46. Ashworth, *Hells Canyon*, 171; Norton, *Snake Wilderness*, 58-59, 64.

47. Lewiston, Idaho, *Tribune*, September 17, 1971.

48. *Ibid.*, June 27, 1971. Despite their differences, Church and Henault always maintained a close working relationship. See, for example, Pete Henault to Frank Church, November 30, 1972, p. 2, file 14, box 108, category 1.1, MS 56, Church Papers.

49. In its newsletter, the Hells Canyon Preservation Council said the national recreation area label was akin to "calling the Notre Dame Cathedral the 'Notre Dame Recreation Hall.'" But it also noted that "the name is a very wise tactical move recommended by Senator Church and the Council supports it." *Hells Canyon News*, November 1972, p. 3, file 14, box 108, category 1.1, MS 56, Church Papers.

50. Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, *Testimony on S. 2233*, 93d Cong., 2d sess., December 14-15, 1973; Ashworth, *Hells Canyon*, 192. McClure replaced Jordan after the 1972 election.

51. Brock Evans, "Success at Hells Canyon," *Sierra Club Bulletin*, 61 (April 1976), 6.

Naturally, the Hells Canyon Preservation Council endorsed this brash move by the freshman senator. But the tactic infuriated Church. Though he realized the moratorium was not the best solution for environmental preservationists, Church believed it was a workable compromise with pro-development forces, including Jordan. Packwood's amendment threatened to upset Church's carefully crafted rapprochement, and Church swung into action. Rallying the other Northwest senators against the scheme, Church campaigned against Packwood's proposal until cosponsors "peeled off in droves." Packwood backed down and declined to offer his amendment.⁴⁵

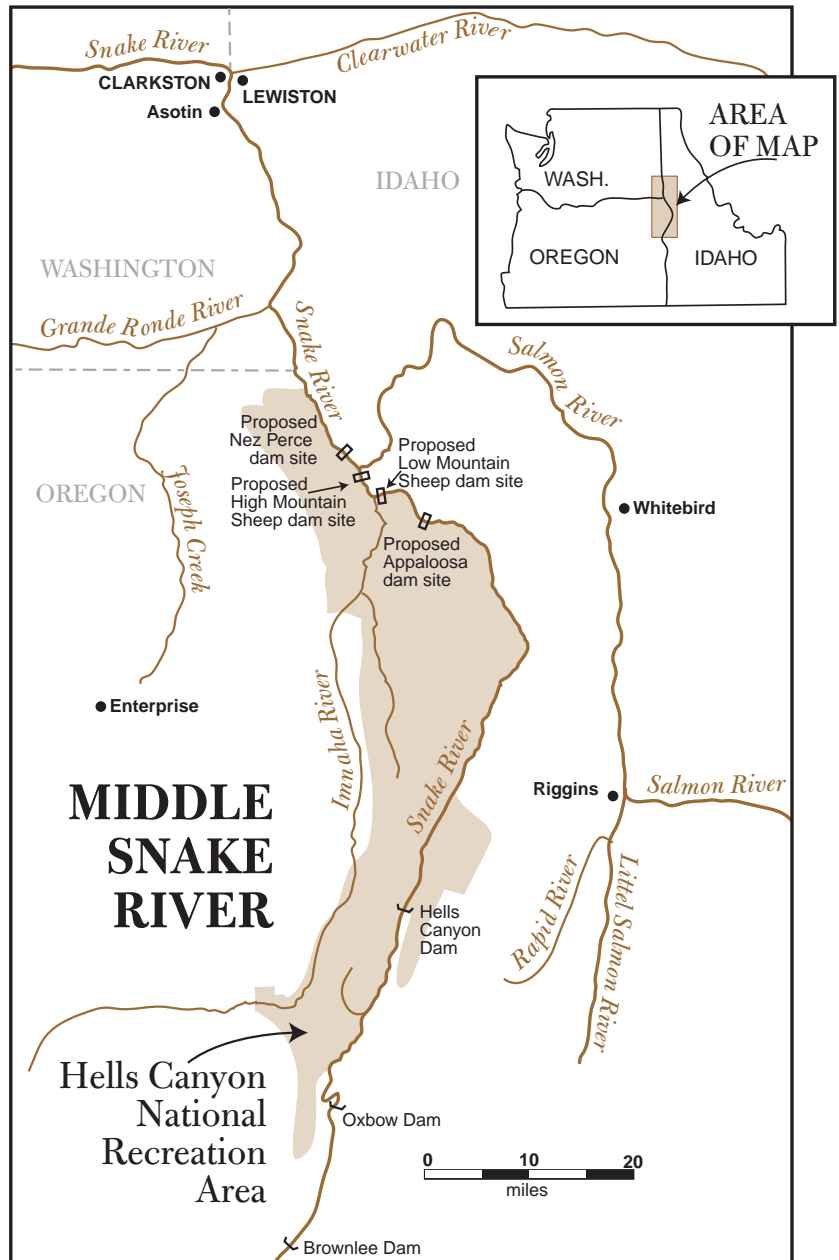
Yet two significant results emerged from this confrontation. First, as a concession to Packwood, the Senate Interior Committee scheduled full-scale hearings on the national river bill. Second, representatives from more than forty organizations coalesced to create the Coalition to Save the Snake, a second advocacy group favoring preservation of the gorge. Although the coalition and the Hells Canyon Preservation Council actively participated in the hearings, it was clear the Senate Interior Committee opposed the Hells Canyon-Snake National River Bill. To the groups, "the behavior of Frank Church was especially puzzling." While his often brutal cross-examination of pro-dam advocates clearly indicated his preservationist stance, Church, as one observer noted, was equally "bitter almost to the point of vindictiveness" toward witnesses from the coalition and the council, leaving preservationists wondering "just which side he was on."⁴⁶

Prior to the hearings, however, these same preservationists had launched scathing attacks on Church, criticizing him as "hypocritical" and a "sell out" on Hells Canyon. Stung by these accusations, Church railed against this "lurid slur on the integrity of a senator like myself" and submitted numerous articles, letters, and statements for the record demonstrating his vigorous commitment to preservation.⁴⁷

The relationship between the Hells Canyon Preservation Council and Senator Church was rocky indeed, but the council had reason to believe Church would eventually support the national river concept as best for the Middle Snake. In a June 1971 inter-

view, Pete Henault, the head of the council, stated: "We have a promise from Senator Church that if the moratorium hasn't gone any place by the end of the year, he will reconsider his position."⁴⁸ The moratorium did not pass.

Finally, in fall 1972, with public sentiment swinging toward preservation, Jordan leaving the Senate, and his own reelection campaign still two years away, Church approached the Hells Canyon Preservation Council about drafting a replacement to the defunct Hells Canyon-Snake National River Bill. At Church's suggestion, a bill to create a Hells Canyon National Recreation Area—a name the council did not like but agreed to in order to gain Church's support—replaced the national river concept.⁴⁹



The bill was formally introduced in July 1973. Referred to as the “Four Senators Bill” for sponsors Church, Packwood, James McClure (R-Idaho), and Mark Hatfield (R-Oregon), it contained input from the Sierra Club, Wilderness Society, Hells Canyon Preservation Council, and others. Although hearings in December gave a 63 percent favorable rating to the proposal, the bill encountered hostile opposition in the House from Representative Craig Hosmer (R-California). Hosmer managed to kill the bill for the 1974 legislative session with constant calls for a quorum, saying: “My objection to it is that if these environmentalists are allowed to lock up the country, the people aren’t going to be able to eat or keep warm or anything.”⁵⁰

Momentum favored passage, however, and after reintroduction in 1975, the bill that created the 662,000-acre Hells Canyon National Recreation Area passed both houses, and President Gerald Ford signed it into law on December 31. Brock Evans, director of the Sierra Club, hailed the victory as “one of the greatest in the history of American environmentalism.”⁵¹

The language of the act reflected the change in Church. The stated purpose of the recreation area was “to assure that the natural beauty and historical and archaeological values of the Hells Canyon area . . . are preserved for this and future generations.” No longer was Church’s ideal the high federal dam he had argued for eighteen years earlier in his first Senate speech, but “recreational and ecological values and public enjoyment.” In addition to the recreation area, the act also designated a 192,000-acre Hells Canyon Wilderness and added sixty-seven miles of the Snake River and nearly twenty-seven miles of the Rapid River to the Wild and Scenic Rivers system. The law not only explicitly prohibited the Federal Power Commission from licensing any water diversion proposals in Hells Canyon but also “deauthorized” Asotin Dam just above the confluence of the Snake and Clearwater rivers.⁵²

Frank Church’s conversion to the environmental

preservation movement was neither painless nor smooth. One historian observed that “caught between ardent environmentalists and Idaho’s mining, logging, and private power interests, Church was hard pressed to please anyone.”⁵³ In August 1971, for example, the Pacific Northwest Power Company announced the results of an opinion survey “on the attitude of Idahoans concerning use of natural resources [that] show that more of the Gem state’s citizens support development of additional electric power and water supply than oppose it.” At nearly the same time the 1972 Ralph Nader Congress Project noted: “As far as environment goes, Church is the best we have. He is more politically practical [than conservationists]—more of a political animal because he has to live with the realities of Idaho politics.” A lobbyist with a national conservation organization added: “Church is not going far enough, but if you consider his constituency, he’s doing pretty well.” Church himself admitted:

The major difficulty has been trying to find the proper balance between needed development of our nation’s resources to maintain full employment and prosperity on the one hand and improve and preserve the quality of human life and the environment on the other.⁵⁴

In all, Church’s environmental record was impressive. In 1961, as a freshman, Church successfully managed the floor fight for the Wilderness Act in the Senate, and he voted for it each year until it passed in 1964. He secured Wild and Scenic Rivers legislation in 1968, cosponsored an act to preserve Redwood National Park in 1968, spoke out passionately about the dangers of the atomic age and radioactive pollution in 1970, protected Idaho’s spectacular Sawtooth Mountains from a giant open-pit mine in 1972, sponsored the Endangered American Wilderness Act of 1978, pushed for a thorough and timely Roadless Area Review and Evaluation (RARE II) in 1979, publicly criticized the Sagebrush Rebellion—a conservative, antigovernment, antienvironmentalist states rights movement—in 1979, and protected more than 3.8 million acres of wilderness in Idaho alone. Former Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall called Church “one of the preeminent leaders” on environmental issues in Congress.⁵⁵

52. Public Law 199, 94th Cong., 2d sess. (December 31, 1975), 1117, also in file 8, box 4, MS 124, Hutchinson Papers. The Rapid River is a tributary to the Salmon, joining the Little Salmon about ten miles south of Riggins, Idaho, which conjoins with the main Salmon at Riggins. It is mainly a north-flowing river that drains the east side of the Seven Devils Mountains.

53. Ashby and Gramer, *Fighting the Odds*, 353.

54. Clem Sterns, Pacific Northwest Power Company press release, August 19, 1971, file 21, box 3, MS 124, Hutchinson Papers; Payne and Carpenter, *Ralph Nader Congress Project*, 15; “Ralph Nader Congress Project Questionnaire,” question 180, file 14, box 4, category 10.6, MS 56, Church Papers.

55. Stewart Udall, interview by Rod Gramer, June 11, 1979, MS 173, Church Papers.

56. Martin, *Idaho Voting Trends*, 16, 118, 690. Borah served for thirty-three years, from 1907 until his death in 1940.


57. Steve Symms, interview by Rod Gramer, June 3, 1980, MS 173, Church Papers. The Frank Church–River of No Return Wilderness, known by outdoor enthusiasts simply as “The Frank,” is 2,366,698 acres.

58. Ralph W. Hansen and Deborah J. Roberts, *The Frank Church Papers: A Summary Guide* (Boise, Idaho, 1988), 32; Payne and Carpenter, *Ralph Nader Congress Project*, 7.

By all indications, Church was not merely a political opportunist. The senator often led his constituents in directions political pundits told him they would not go, particularly on environmental issues. Yet in Idaho throughout the 1960s, even as voters grew more conservative, they continued to return the liberal Church to the Senate. In the 1968 election, for example, Richard Nixon carried Idaho with just over 56 percent of the vote, and Republicans easily claimed both of Idaho's House seats. In that same election, voters elected Church to a third term by a whopping 60.3 percent majority. By way of explanation, one political observer noted that "Idaho's political history has been characterized by a high degree of political independence, attraction to political figures, and highly selective voting."⁵⁶

In 1980, however, Church lost his bid for a fifth term to conservative Steve Symms by just 4,262 votes. A result of the Reagan Revolution, Carter's early concession, and a well-financed, negative campaign against him, Church's defeat signaled the end of proactive environmental legislation from the Idaho congressional delegation. Symms, in fact, once jokingly observed that he saw "some advantages to having a hamburger stand on every peak." In 1984, the nation lost Church, who succumbed to pancreatic cancer at the age of fifty-nine. Just before his death, however, Congress appended his name to the largest roadless area in the continental United States: The Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness in Idaho.⁵⁷

On the growth of his environmental consciousness, Church observed that the major difficulty was finding a balance between "development of our nation's resources . . . on the one hand" and improving and preserving the "quality of human life and the environment on the other." In 1980 Church lost his bid for a fifth Senate term. Four years later, he succumbed to pancreatic cancer and the conservation movement lost a great leader. Mourners paid their last respects to Church in the Idaho statehouse (right, 1984).

Though some environmental activists and critics have characterized Church's willingness to compromise as indicative of an incomplete commitment to preservation, Church once commented, "Sometimes it is necessary to take the unpopular positions. I have to live with my conscience a lot longer than I'll have to live with my job." In the end, Church did not embrace environmental concerns because they were popular but because he believed they were right. "What I had to do was simply vote my convictions. . . . If the people believe you are serving the state, they will not demand that you agree on all issues." When examined in complete perspective, Church's participation in the Hells Canyon controversy reveals a fundamental value shift—from pro-development to pro-preservation—and the growth of an environmental consciousness in the senator from Idaho.⁵⁸ 

SARA E. DANT EWERT is an assistant professor of history at Weber State University in Ogden, Utah. Her dissertation, "The Conversion of Senator Frank Church: Evolution of an Environmentalist," explores the environmental politics of Idaho's four-term senator. She is currently researching the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965.



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