

*American Rivers * American Whitewater * Association of Northwest Steelheaders
Center for Environmental Law & Policy * Coastal Trollers Association
Conservation Voters for Idaho * Columbia Riverkeeper * Defenders of Wildlife
Earth Ministry/Washington Interfaith Power and Light * Endangered Species Coalition
Fly Fishers International * Idaho Conservation League * Idaho Rivers United
Idaho Wildlife Federation * League of Conservation Voters * Natural Resources Defense Council
Nimiipuu Protecting the Environment * Northwest Guides and Anglers Association
Northwest Sportfishing Industry Association * NW Energy Coalition * Orca Conservancy
Oregon League of Conservation Voters * Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations
Save Our wild Salmon Coalition * Sierra Club * Snohomish County Indivisible
Washington Conservation Action * Washington Wild * Whale Scout * Wild Orca
Wild Steelhead Coalition * Willamette Riverkeeper*

September 13, 2023

The Honorable Paul Gosar, Chair
House Natural Resources Committee
Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee

The Honorable Melanie Stansbury Ranking Member
House Natural Resources Committee
Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee

Dear Chair Gosar, Ranking Member Stansbury, and members of the Subcommittee:

We write to you on behalf of millions of our members to call attention to the critical need to protect and restore Columbia and Snake River salmon and steelhead in advance of the Thursday, September 14 hearing in the House Natural Resources Committee's Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations.

Salmon and steelhead are an integral part of life in the Northwest. They are the foundation of an entire ecosystem from forests to orcas; they support multi-billion dollar industries and family wage jobs from commercial fishing to tourism and manufacturing in rural communities; and most importantly, they are indispensable to the culture and way of life for many Northwest Tribes that have relied on them since time immemorial and to whom we owe solemn legal responsibility enshrined in treaties and other agreements.

The Columbia and Snake Rivers were once the largest salmon-producing river system in the contiguous United States, but now many runs – and all of those that still return to the Snake River -- are listed as endangered or threatened. Many others have already been lost. Decades of scientific study confirm that the federal hydroelectric dams on the Columbia and Snake Rivers play a leading role in these devastating declines.

It is impossible to imagine the Northwest without salmon—yet we are perilously close to losing many runs of these remarkable fish. The federal government's own analysis predicts that the continued operation of these dams will drive many Snake River salmon runs to extinction in the near term.¹ More recent analysis by fisheries experts with the Nez Perce Tribe predicts that many of these same Snake River populations may become functionally extinct as soon as 2025, unless we act with urgency to change their trajectory.²

The loss of our native salmon is as unnecessary as it is unacceptable. Salmon scientists have repeatedly concluded that even in a warming world, we can restore Snake River salmon and steelhead to healthy and abundant levels—if and only if we restore the lower Snake River by breaching its four costly federal dams.³

In 2021 Representative Simpson of Idaho (R) put forth an ambitious and comprehensive proposal (Columbia Basin Initiative), effectively advancing an important conversation across the region regarding the urgency and opportunities to responsibly restore the lower Snake River and replace the services provided by its four dams so that the Northwest will continue to have abundant and affordable clean energy, accessible transportation for agricultural products and other goods, and irrigation for established farmland.

Additional analyses, including the recent lower Snake River report and recommendations by Senator Murray and Governor Inslee, stated, “*status quo is not a responsible option; extinction of salmon is categorically unacceptable*”. Senator Murray and Governor Inslee further stated in their recommendations, “*we must move forward in a way that restores our salmon populations and acknowledges and redresses the harms to Tribes while responsibly charting the course to an energy and economic future for Washington state and the region. It is for these reasons that we previously stated that breaching of the Lower Snake River Dams should be an option, and why we believe, at the conclusion of this Process, that it must be an option we strive to make viable*”.⁴

Governor Inslee and Washington State legislators followed through on these commitments and secured \$7.5 million dollars in 2023 to begin the planning processes to replace the energy, transportation, and irrigation services currently provided by the dams. We can feasibly and affordably replace the services of the 4 lower Snake River dams with reliable, modernized systems, but we must start that effort in earnest now – and we need Congressional leadership and support.

We ask the members of this subcommittee to replace the services of the Snake River dams so we can restore the river and breach the dams by 2030 at the latest. Working with the Administration, Congress can help direct unprecedented federal investments through the *Inflation Reduction Act* and *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act* to regional projects that advance our clean energy and climate goals, modernize our transportation systems, and address other interests affected by river restoration.

The Biden Administration has articulated a clear set of commitments to restore healthy and abundant salmon runs and honor our nation’s obligations to Tribes by turning away from the “business as usual” approach of the past and charting a new path forward in the Columbia Basin.⁵ We urge you to work with the Administration to achieve these goals. Our region’s native fish face extinction today, and the time for action and leadership is now.

Now more than ever, we ask you to seize every opportunity to speak the truth in the face of misleading information and polarizing tactics. Defenders of a failed and costly status quo have never been more vocal in their opposition to actions that are essential to salmon restoration, including the restoration of the lower Snake River and its wild salmon and steelhead.

In a recent congressional field hearing, for example, supporters of the status quo asserted that salmon runs are not in any imminent danger and are increasing—despite the fact that Snake River runs are hovering near extinction levels.⁶ They also provided exaggerated and misleading

information about the role these dams play in our regional economy. And remarkably, not a single Tribal representative was invited to testify, despite the fact that Tribes have been the first and worst impacted by generational declines in the salmon runs.⁷

Misinformation and polarizing tactics will never form the backbone of a durable solution. Building support for a real and durable solution starts by acknowledging the facts. We ask you to lend your voices to elevate fact over divisive rhetoric.

It is critical that Congress and the Administration work with Tribal Nations, stakeholders, and all others in the Northwest to implement a comprehensive solution that will restore healthy and abundant salmon in the Columbia and Snake Rivers, provide a long-overdue measure of justice for Native American Tribes, and ensure a successful transition to a strong and robust future.

Sincerely,

Liz Hamilton, Executive Director
Northwest Sportfishing Industry Association

Bradley Williams, Associate Advocacy Director
Sierra Club

Tiernan Sittenfeld, Senior Vice President for Government Affairs
League of Conservation Voters

Giulia Good Stefani, Senior Attorney, Oceans
Natural Resources Defense Council

Rev. AC Churchill, Executive Director
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Shawn Cantrell, Vice President, Field Conservation Programs
Defenders of Wildlife

Thomas O'Keefe, Northwest Regional Director
American Whitewater

Joseph Bogaard, Executive Director
Save Our wild Salmon Coalition

Shari Tarantino, Executive Director
Orca Conservancy

Brian Brooks, Executive Director
Idaho Wildlife Federation

Nancy Hirsh, Executive Director
NW Energy Coalition

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Wild Steelhead Coalition

Mitch Cutter, Salmon and Steelhead Associate
Idaho Conservation League

Bob Rees, Executive Director
Northwest Guides and Anglers Association

¹ See NMFS' Endangered Species Act Section 7(a)(2) Biological Opinion for the Continued Operation and Maintenance of the Federal Columbia River Power System at p.275 ("Based on life-cycle modelling of [hydrosystem operations in combination with] future RCP 8.5 climate emission scenario for [Snake River] spring/summer Chinook salmon populations, the median abundance of stream-type spring and summer-run Chinook salmon populations could decline substantially in the next two to three decades. Declines of this magnitude, if they were to occur, would threaten to extirpate a large number of small populations, and would substantially reduce the abundance and productivity of larger populations."). [PDF](#)

² Nez Perce Tribe and the New Perce Fisheries: Snake Basin Chinook and Steelhead Quasi-Extinction Threshold Alarm and Call to Action (May 2021) [PDF](#)

³ National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA): Rebuilding Interior Columbia Basin Salmon and Steelhead; National Marine Fisheries Service (Sept. 30, 2022) [PDF](#)

⁴ Sen. Murray / Gov. Inslee: Pacific Northwest Salmon Recovery Recommendations (Aug, 2022) [PDF](#).

⁵ Biden Administration Columbia Basin Salmon Recovery Commitment Document (Aug, 2022) [PDF](#).

⁶ See The Spokesman Review, Environmentalists, politicians clash over Republican hearing to defend Snake River dams (June 26, 2023), available at <https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2023/jun/26/environmentalists-politicians-clash-over-republica/>

⁷ Id.