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Snake River

THREAT: Four federal dams, climate change, poor water quality

STATES:

Idaho, Washington, Oregon

AT RISK:

Salmon runs, native rights and culture, prosperity for the Northwest

SUMMARY

Salmon are the spiritual and cultural icon of the Pacific Northwest and a critical component of the Northwest's economy. Unfortunately, these magnificent fish are teetering on the brink of extinction. The loss of salmon, a keystone species, has devastated ecosystems, native cultures, and fishing communities across the region.

Scientists say that the Snake River, the largest tributary and historically the most prolific producer of salmon in the Columbia River Basin, holds the largest potential for restoring salmon to healthy, harvestable numbers. To accomplish this, removing four dams on the lower Snake River in eastern Washington is essential along with increasing flow over downstream dams. A comprehensive salmon recovery plan is vital to honoring treaties and responsibilities to Northwest tribes. This comprehensive plan must also include job-creating investments in clean energy and agriculture, to secure a future of abundance and prosperity in the Pacific Northwest. The region's congressional delegation must ensure these urgently needed solutions are a key part of President Biden's national infrastructure legislation.

PHOTO: CARL ZOCH

THE RIVER

The Snake River is the largest tributary of the Columbia River, flowing more than 1,000 miles from its headwaters in Wyoming to the confluence with the Columbia at the Tri-Cities in Washington. The Snake Basin is home to 50 percent of the current cold water habitat for Pacific salmon in all of the lower 48, and once produced 40 percent of the prized Chinook salmon and over half steelhead in the Columbia River Basin. The Snake River and its tributaries including the Clearwater, Salmon, Grande Ronde, Imnaha and Tucannon rivers once produced 2-6 million salmon and steelhead every year. A keystone species, these fish support the entire food web, including at least 135 species from eagles to salamanders to Southern Resident killer whales.

Salmon are at the heart of the cultures of Northwest Native American tribes, integral to religion, identity and physical sustenance. Historically, the region's native tribes were wealthy people thanks in large part to a trade economy based on abundant salmon. Today, the annual salmon return and the First Salmon ceremonies continue to ensure the renewal of all life. Tribes have led regional salmon recovery efforts for decades.

Abundant returns of salmon are critical to local economies, driving lucrative recreation and tourism businesses, commercial fishing and restaurants. Recreational fishing in the Pacific Northwest generates more than \$5.3 billion annually in economic benefits and supports more than 36,000 jobs. But in recent years, businesses have been devastated by poor salmon returns. The State of Idaho closed the Clearwater River and parts of the Snake River to steelhead fishing in fall 2019 because of the low numbers of fish. It is estimated that salmon and steelhead fishing brings in about \$8.61 million a month to this part of Idaho, and these communities took a significant economic hit with the fishing closure.

THE THREAT

From 1955 to 1975, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built four dams on the lower Snake River in southeast Washington to enable barge transportation to Lewiston, Idaho and to produce hydropower. The dams -- Ice Harbor, Lower Monumental, Little Goose and Lower Granite -- have provided significant benefits to the region, but they have come at a staggering cost.



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Continued

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TAKE ACTION:

**[AmericanRivers.org/
SnakeRiver2021](https://AmericanRivers.org/SnakeRiver2021)**

PHOTO: NEIL EVER OSBORNE

Wild salmon returns plummeted by over 90 percent following construction of these four federal dams on lower the Snake River. In recent years, fewer than 10,000 wild Chinook salmon have returned to spawn. Today, 13 Columbia-Snake salmon and steelhead populations are protected under the Endangered Species Act. Scientists believe that all four salmon and steelhead populations in the Snake River Basin will go extinct without urgent action.

The four lower Snake dams turned 140 miles of cool, flowing river into a series of stagnant reservoirs. The dams disrupt and slow natural river flows, create lethally high reservoir temperatures which allow non-native predators to thrive, impede migration of salmon to and from the Pacific Ocean, and kill young salmon attempting to pass through the dams. The threat posed by the dams is exacerbated by climate change, which is warming up the Snake River and making conditions even more dire for salmon. In 2015, for example, 96 percent of the Snake River sockeye died trying to navigate through lethally warm waters to cooler tributaries and spawning grounds upstream. While the dams are heating up the major river thoroughfares for salmon, scientists estimate

that the essential habitat above the dams will continue to provide clean, cold water. Scientists estimate that by 2080 the Snake River Basin will provide two-thirds of the coldest, most climate resilient stream habitats for salmon and steelhead on the West Coast.

The dams on the lower Snake River are an ongoing source of injustice and the loss of salmon is violating Native American rights ensured by treaty with the U.S. government. The dams and reservoirs submerged or impacted between 600 and 700 important tribal cultural sites along the lower Snake and its tributaries, thousands of acres of treaty-based hunting and gathering places, and countless graves of loved ones and sacred and ceremonial places. According to the report, "Tribal Circumstances and Impacts of the Lower Snake River Project on the Nez Perce, Yakama, Umatilla, Warm Springs and Shoshone Bannock Tribes," loss of salmon threatens culture, community connection and well-being and is a major factor in health and income disparities.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

The Pacific Northwest has a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to honor treaties and commitments with Northwest Native American tribes and revitalize the region's economy through restoring abundant numbers of Snake River basin salmon and invigorating clean energy, agriculture and recreational opportunities.

In February 2021, Congressman Mike Simpson (R-ID) proposed a \$33.5 billion framework that includes critical river restoration measures regionwide, including but not limited to the restoration of the lower Snake River by removal of the four dams. It would be the biggest river and salmon restoration effort in history. His proposal also includes investments to replace the energy produced at the dams and increase the energy grid's reliability, and upgrade transportation and irrigation services that the lower Snake River dams currently provide, and support community needs.

The Pacific Northwest has a track record of crafting innovative, bipartisan solutions to challenging water and river issues. The Northwest congressional delegation must bring together the governors, tribes and stakeholders to build upon Congressman Simpson's framework, ensuring it is as strong as possible and meets the region's urgent needs. A well-crafted, collaboratively developed, comprehensive solution would benefit not only the Northwest, but also the nation as a whole by restoring salmon runs, bolstering clean energy and strengthening the economy of one of the most dynamic regions in the country. Congressional leaders from both major political parties should introduce legislation and ensure it advances as part of President Biden's national infrastructure legislation.