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SNAKE RIVER

THREAT: Four federal dams (Ice Harbor, Lower Monumental, Little Goose, Lower Granite)

LOWER SNAKE RIVER, WASHINGTON
PHOTO: CARL ZOCH

STATES:
Idaho, Oregon, Washington

AT RISK:
Tribal Treaty rights and culture, endangered salmon runs, rural communities, local economies

SUMMARY

Four dams have pushed salmon in the Snake River – once the most prolific salmon-producing river in the Columbia River Basin – to the brink of extinction. Snake River salmon are sacred to Tribal Nations across the region and are the keystone species for ecosystems from the Salish Sea in Washington to the lower Columbia River estuary to the mountain streams of north-central Idaho. By removing the four dams on the lower Snake River and replacing their services, the Northwest has a once-in-a-generation opportunity to restore Snake River salmon to healthy, harvestable levels, honor our commitments and treaties with Northwest tribes, create jobs for rural economies across the region and modernize the infrastructure of the Pacific Northwest. The region's congressional delegation and the Biden administration must take action to develop and implement a plan to remove the dams in an expedient fashion.

THE RIVER

The Snake River begins high in the mountains of Wyoming and flows for more than 1,000 miles before merging with the Columbia River at the Tri-Cities in eastern Washington. As the largest tributary of the Columbia, the Snake once produced 40 percent of the prized Chinook salmon and steelhead in the Columbia River Basin. Each year, fewer Snake River salmon complete the return trip from the ocean in what remains the longest distance, highest-elevation salmon migration on earth. The Snake River and its main tributaries, including the Clearwater, Salmon, Grande Ronde, Imnaha and Tucannon rivers, once produced 2 to 6 million salmon and steelhead every year. As a keystone species, these fish support the entire food web from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, including at least 135 species from eagles to salamanders to the highly endangered Southern Resident killer whales.

Salmon are at the heart of the cultures of Northwest Tribal Nations— integral to religion, identity and physical sustenance. Historically, the region's 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. In recent years, the lack of salmon has been devastating to communities across the region. Businesses that depend upon the recreation and tourism dollars that salmon bring are suffering, and commitments to Northwest Tribal Nations remain unfulfilled.

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 a modest amount of hydropower. The dams— Ice Harbor, Lower Monumental, Little Goose and Lower Granite— have provided benefits to the region, but they have come at a staggering cost.

Wild salmon returns plummeted by more than 90 percent following the construction of the four dams. Today, 13 salmon and steelhead runs in the Columbia and Snake rivers are listed under the Endangered Species Act, and the federal government has repeatedly failed to

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SNAKE RIVER

Continued

CHINOOK SALMON
PHOTO: OREGON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

produce an effective and legal recovery plan required by the law. Researchers with the Nez Perce Tribe's Department of Fisheries Resource Management have predicted that by 2025, 77 percent of wild Chinook populations will become functionally extinct, meaning they have passed a biological threshold of long-term viability. Scientists believe all four salmon and steelhead runs in the Snake River Basin will go extinct without urgent action.

The four lower Snake dams turned 140 miles of cool, free-flowing river into a series of slow-moving reservoirs that release methane, a greenhouse gas 80 times more potent than carbon dioxide. The dams disrupt and slow natural river flows, create lethally high reservoir temperatures for salmon, while non-native predators thrive. The dams also impede migration of salmon to and from the Pacific Ocean and kill young salmon attempting to pass through the dams to the ocean. The threats posed by the four dams are exacerbated by climate change, which is increasingly warming the Snake River and making conditions even more dire for salmon. While the dams are heating up the main stem of the Snake River below Lewiston, Idaho, climate models project that the thousands of miles of streams above the dams will continue to provide clean, cold water owing to their high elevation and pristine condition. 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 the rights of Tribal Nations 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, 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 MUST BE DONE

Representative Mike Simpson (R-ID) and Representative Earl Blumenauer (D-OR) took political initiative in 2021. Political momentum continued to build with U.S. Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) and Washington Governor Jay Inslee's launch of an effort to restore Snake River salmon runs and work with stakeholders across the region to analyze how to replace the hydropower, transportation and irrigation services provided by the four lower Snake dams. Additionally, the Biden administration agreed to work collaboratively to develop and begin implementing a long-term comprehensive solution.

The Pacific Northwest has a track record of crafting innovative, bipartisan solutions to challenging natural resource issues such as the loss of its ancient forests. Now is the time for congressional leaders, the four Pacific Northwest states and the Biden administration to work together to develop a comprehensive plan and pass legislation that restores abundant salmon runs, honors our commitments to tribes, and invests in clean energy, agricultural infrastructure and much-needed transportation upgrades that will benefit the entire region.

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TAKE ACTION:

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