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# SNAKE RIVER

**THREAT: Four federal dams**

**STATES:** Idaho, Oregon, Washington

**AT RISK:** Tribal treaty rights and culture, endangered salmon runs, rural and local communities

## SUMMARY

Salmon in the Columbia-Snake River basin are on the brink of extinction in large part due to four dams on the lower Snake in eastern Washington. Restoring salmon runs and honoring treaties and responsibilities with Tribal Nations across the region requires removal of these four dams. Momentum and support for this river restoration effort is growing, but it is critical that the hydropower, transportation, and irrigation services of the dams are replaced before dam removal can begin. The region's congressional delegation and the Biden administration must act with urgency to invest in infrastructure so that the dams can be removed, setting the Northwest on a course to climate resilience, economic strength, abundant salmon, and cultural revitalization.

## 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 2-6 million fish annually, or 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.

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. 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

The four dams on the lower Snake River provide irrigation, transportation, and hydropower generation benefits to economies of the inland Northwest. Since construction of the dams concluded in 1975, the four lower Snake River dams have contributed to dramatic decreases in the basin's salmon and steelhead populations. All Snake Basin salmon and steelhead populations are now listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

In January 2023, the American Fisheries Society, the world's oldest and largest organization dedicated to strengthening the fisheries profession, advancing fisheries science, and conserving fisheries resources, issued a position statement calling for

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## TAKE ACTION:

[AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/  
SNAKERIVER2023](https://AMERICANRIVERS.ORG/SNAKERIVER2023)

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the removal of the lower four Snake River dams. The statement reads in part; “(w)hen the body of scientific evidence is considered, it is clear that breaching the four lower Snake River dams is necessary to (1) substantially improve the probability of recovering these cultural and ecological keystone species to healthy and harvestable populations and (2) safeguard those fishes from extinction.” It’s clear that salmon cannot recover with the lower four Snake River dams in place.

The urgency of removing the lower four Snake River dams has been increased by current and future threats from climate change. The dams turned was once a free-

flowing river into a series of still-water reservoirs that act as a bathtub left in the sun, contributing to increased water temperatures and exacerbating climate change through emissions of methane. Temperatures in the lower Snake now consistently reach 70 degrees, a temperature which can be lethal for salmon and steelhead, in July and remain high throughout summer months. Upstream from the four dams lies some of the best cold-water fisheries habitat in the continental United States, with the Salmon, Grande Ronde, Clearwater and other Snake tributaries projected to represent over 65% of the nation’s coldwater fish habitat by the year 2080.

## WHAT MUST BE DONE

Washington Governor Jay Inslee and Senator Patty Murray issued a report in late 2022 that showed that the services the dams provide can be replaced with new infrastructure, and that these investments must be made before the dams can be removed. Even the important, though modest, contributions of power to the Northwest electrical grid can be replaced with a variety of new clean energy resources. Nimipuu Energy, a project led by the Nez Perce Tribe, is leading the way in developing alternative energy resources, with the ultimate goal of producing 5,311MW of solar power- the amount BPA has stated is required to replace the power generated by the lower four Snake River dams.

We need an action plan that identifies the additional strategies and development needed to replace the services provided by the dams — irrigation, transportation, and energy — with other forms of infrastructure that allow for local economies and salmon to thrive in harmony, rather than in conflict. With Northwest Tribes leading the way on renewable energy, Federal and Northwest State governments and agencies should follow this lead and procure new clean energy resources and prioritize investments in grid modernization and energy storage to set in motion this transition.