Don’t Dam Salmon (or Orcas)

Wild salmon and steelhead are critical to the Pacific Northwest’s ecology, cultures, and economy. We applaud Governor Kate Brown’s letter to Governor Jay Inslee in support of a pathway to breach the Lower Snake River dams. Salmon and steelhead populations are on a continuous decline, as are the treasured southern resident orca whales that depend on them. The Lower Snake River Dams must be breached.

I write as a member of the Great Old Broads for Wilderness, a national grassroots organization that educates and inspires activists to preserve and protect wilderness, wild lands and wildlife. Volunteer members of 8 active PNW chapters are speaking out for salmon, steelhead and orca survival. We have met with Governor Kate Brown, Senator Merkley, and many PNW representatives from the tri-state area. We support return of a free-flowing and natural ecosystem on the Lower Snake River. This is surest step toward returning these endangered species to sustainable populations.

For decades, eight Lower Snake and Columbia river dams/reservoirs have hampered, harmed, and killed four migrating fish species. While data shows migrating fish can survive the four Columbia river dams at an “acceptable rate”, it also shows that their journey through the 8 dams slows their travel so significantly that they often reach the ocean past the biological stage that allows them to adapt to ocean saltwater. One study showed that smolts (young salmon) on the upper Snake River can take up to 39 days to reach the ocean, compared with less than three days in the pre-dam environment. Slow moving reservoirs delay downstream juveniles, creating stagnant waters with lethally high temperatures, and killing additional thousands of adult salmon returning to their birth streams. Sadly, the lack of Snake River Chinook salmon, a primary food source for the Salish Sea’s southern resident orcas, has brought these whales to the brink of extinction.

The four Lower Snake River Dams were originally designed to provide energy and freight transportation.

Currently, dams provide only 4% of the region’s power, which could be replaced by investment in wind and solar energy. These dams became operational between 1961 and 1975, and were expected to have an average lifespan of 40 years. As a result, the Bonneville Power Administration is in debt because of the cost of maintaining these aging dams and falling prices of energy. Energy produced by these four dams cost 30% more than current wholesale pricing. American taxpayers cannot afford to keep investing in these dams, when alternative energy sources are available. Barge transport on the Lower Snake has declined for 20 years, in favor of truck and rail. Current barge transport on the Lower Snake River is heavily subsidized by tax dollars.

There are many benefits of a restored, resilient flow in the Lower Snake River. Endangered wild salmon and steelhead are resilient and science predicts the breach of the dams will improve their survival two-to three-fold. American taxpayer and Northwest energy consumer dollars will be saved by investment in wind and solar energy. Dam breach will aid the recovery of 15,000 acres of prime riparian habitat and will restore access of salmon and steelhead to millions of acres of cooler, high-elevation watersheds in Idaho. Over 5000 miles of rivers and streams, Pacific Northwest indigenous and nonindigenous lifestyles, and local economies will be revitalized.

Many issues facing our environment today feel out of our control; this is not one of them. We can do something to restore the ecosystem of the Lower Snake River. We encourage the work of government officials, scientists, conservationists, and the public, to take appropriate actions to return the Lower Snake River to its natural state. We can restore healthy populations of salmon, steelhead and orcas, while continuing to develop cleaner energy sources and a better economy for the Pacific Northwest.

On behalf of our respective members,

Rynda Clark

PNW Broads Regional Advocacy Team

Great Old Broads for Wilderness