

PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Northwest Tribes Remain United Around Lower Snake River Dam Removal and Other Infrastructure Needs for Salmon

Lapwai, Idaho — After some Northwest elected officials recently suggested that Pacific Northwest tribes could be divided around salmon recovery, Columbia Basin tribes once again affirmed that they stand united in their support of saving endangered Northwest salmon and in their belief that the true wealth of the Northwest begins with the health of its rivers, fish, and the ecosystem they support. This commitment to unity—forged to assist Columbia and Snake River salmon and steelhead and secure continued resources for culvert and other barrier removals that will help imperiled Puget Sound salmon populations—extends to the proposed Columbia Basin Initiative that Congressman Mike Simpson (R-ID) unveiled several months ago that emphasizes the urgency of the salmon crisis and the unique opportunity for leadership from the Northwest and the Biden Administration.

“Any efforts to divide the indigenous peoples of this region by suggesting that the Puget Sound Tribes don’t have the same interests as the Northwest Inland Tribes have been soundly rejected by tribal leaders,” said Nez Perce Tribe Chairman, Samuel Penney. “The salmon are a life source that we all depend on, in more ways than one. We will continue to fight for their survival together because just as we are united with each other, we are also united with the salmon; we are all salmon people. We are here speaking for the salmon and upholding our commitment to them as they have done, and continue to try to do, for us.”

Penney pointed out the great import of this moment and the Tribes’ declaration of unity on this issue, including amongst Tribes whose ancestors warred with one another and yet who now stand in solidarity. “The sacred and life-sustaining issues of water and salmon, and this unprecedented moment offering a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make real progress in saving this once bountiful fish for our children and grandchildren, has given us in Indian Country cause to set aside any past differences. We call upon the many other regional interests, parties, and stakeholders in this decades-long stalemate to do the same and to agree to a meaningful plan that restores the rivers of the Columbia Basin and the salmon runs to their former strength and health. For us, we believe the answers can be found in Rep. Simpson’s proposed framework.”

Senator Maria Cantwell (D-WA), in expressing opposition to the Simpson outline, recently pointed out that more investments were needed for removal and replacement of highway culverts that block salmon passage. Mel Sheldon, former Chairman of the Tulalip Tribes and salmon fisherman, pointed out that such investments, while worthy and needed, don’t holistically address the challenges of the region’s salmon. “We are all fishing people and have been for

generations. Such an appropriation may be of benefit to the Puget Sound Tribes and our salmon here. But it does not help the Idaho salmon and steelhead whose continued existence remains threatened by the four Lower Snake dams,” said Sheldon. “This fateful moment requires more from everyone—bigger thinking, bold action, and a willingness to do what’s right and what’s needed—for the rivers, the fish, and the Tribal peoples who have always depended on both.”

In mid-April, representatives from the 12 Tribes gathered to discuss and ultimately pledge their support for common ground principles found in Simpson’s proposal, which calls for \$33 billion in investments in new clean energy, transportation infrastructure, economic development and research, and salmon conservation actions—including restoring the lower Snake River by removing the four Lower Snake dams.

“Yakama Nation was on the front lines of the historic Treaty fishing wars that established tribal fishing rights through litigation,” said Delano Saluskin, Chairman, Tribal Council, Yakama Nation. “We have also been on the front lines of successful federal, state, local, and industry partnerships like the 2012 Yakima Basin Integrated Plan, which support the restoration of tribal fisheries while also meeting the needs of our communities. Today—in the face of aging energy infrastructure, depressed local economies, climate change, and ever-declining fish runs—we must do something different to preserve our way of life in the Pacific Northwest. We invite and challenge our partners and our neighbors to take a hard look at how Congressman Simpson’s proposal could benefit our energy security, our economies, and our critical natural resources for the benefit of all.”

In addition to providing relief for Columbia and Snake River salmon and steelhead and the Tribal nations that rely upon those fish for their culture and survival, Rep. Simpson’s proposal to remove the four Lower Snake River dams would also benefit the Southern Resident Orca whales that call Puget Sound home. A major food source for these orcas are the Chinook salmon that live and migrate from the inland rivers of central Idaho out to the ocean. Restoring the Lower Snake River and the salmon that grace those rivers will have tremendous benefits for the Southern Resident orcas. In fact, Governor Jay Inslee’s Puget Sound Orca Task Force listed removal of these four dams [in the top 10](#) actions necessary to save these starving killer whales.

“The plight of the Puget Sound orcas, which are sacred to our Nation, are directly tied to the fate of the Snake River Chinook,” said Mel Sheldon. “It would be unfortunate if elected officials were to try and pit Tribal Nations against one another on this issue. We stand united with our indigenous brethren who seek to remove the four lower Snake River dams, just as they stand united with us to ensure that the State of Washington abides by its legal commitment to remove culverts that harm our salmon populations throughout the state.”

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