

PRESS RELEASE

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United States Government’s Analysis of the Impacts of Federal Dams on Columbia Basin Tribes Restores the Rule of Law and Supports Immediate Action to Prevent Salmon Extinction, Nez Perce Tribe Says

Lapwai, ID — Today, the Nez Perce Tribe heralded the United States’ release of its analysis of the federal Columbia River dams’ impacts on Columbia Basin Tribes as reinforcing the obligations of the United States to honor its Treaty and trust obligations and to take immediate action to prevent salmon extinction. This comprehensive “Tribal Circumstances Analysis” report documents the devastating impacts of federal Columbia River dams on Columbia Basin Tribes and provides critical recommendations for upholding the federal government’s Treaty and trust responsibilities.

“The United States – by telling the truth about the historic and ongoing injustices the federal dams have imposed on our people and by embracing its Treaty and trust obligations – is upholding the rule of law and highlighting the urgency to act to prevent salmon extinction,” said Shannon Wheeler, Chairman of the Nez Perce Tribal Executive Committee.

The Columbia Basin Tribes, joined by the Affiliated Tribes of the Northwest Indians and the National Congress of American Indians, all criticized the 2020 Columbia River System Operations Environmental Impact Statement’s failure to evaluate the impact of federal dams on the Columbia Basin Tribes and on the United States’ fulfillment of its Treaty and trust obligations.

“The Tribal Circumstances Analysis is a stark reminder that the federal dams were built on the backs of our Tribal Nations and our people, and continue to decimate our salmon populations and our culture, sovereignty, and way of life,” Chairman Wheeler continued. “We know we must act urgently to prevent extinction, and this report reaffirms the need for the United States and us to move forward together as Treaty partners. We look forward to continuing to work with the United States to take bold and immediate actions to ensure a future where our rivers run free, our salmon return in abundance, and our people thrive,” Wheeler concluded.

Background

The report, known as the “Tribal Circumstances Analysis,” was completed by the United States to fulfill a commitment made in the December 14, 2023 Memorandum of Agreement between the United States and the Six Sovereigns and NWF Plaintiffs which supports a stay of the nearly continuous 30 years of litigation over the federal dams on the lower Snake and mainstem Columbia Rivers.

Key Findings and Historical Context

Since time immemorial, the Nez Perce and other Tribes in the Columbia River Basin have relied on the river’s abundant natural resources, especially salmon, which are integral to their culture, identity, and sustenance. The construction of federal dams, however, has profoundly disrupted this connection. The dams have inundated thousands of acres of tribal lands, destroyed crucial fishing sites like Celilo Falls, and significantly reduced salmon runs, with devastating impacts on tribal communities.

The report underscores this point: "The government’s work to better understand and incorporate tribal perspectives into decision making must continue after the publication of this report. We provide policy recommendations on how this work can and should continue."

Another critical observation from the report states: "The devastation of once abundant salmon, steelhead, and other species in the Columbia River Basin adversely and inequitably impacted Tribes’ spiritual, cultural, and physical health as well. Because these impacts continue today and face new threats from climate change, upholding the federal government’s treaty and trust responsibilities to the Tribes includes working to protect these reserved rights and restore associated resources; improving the spiritual, cultural, and physical well-being of Tribes; and advancing environmental justice."

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