

## Lower Snake River among America's Most Endangered Rivers

Contributed by American Rivers  
Sunday, 12 April 2009

Washington, DC - Four dams on the lower Snake River are driving salmon to the brink of extinction while preventing the Northwest from embracing 21st century energy and transportation opportunities. This threat landed the lower Snake in the number three spot in America's Most Endangered Rivers: 2009 edition.

American Rivers and its partners called on the Obama administration and the Northwest congressional delegation to convene negotiations to forge a river restoration plan that will work for communities and salmon in light of the threats posed by the dams and global warming. Removing the four dams and restoring a free-flowing lower Snake River will not only revive salmon runs and a multi-million dollar fishery, it will eliminate a growing flood threat in Lewiston, Idaho and create an opportunity to modernize the region's transportation and energy systems.

"The fate of the lower Snake River and its communities hangs in the balance," said Rebecca Wodder, president of American Rivers. "There is a tremendous opportunity for the Obama administration and Northwest congressional leaders to lead the charge on a river restoration plan that works for salmon, communities and the region's economy."

For years, the Save Our Wild Salmon coalition has been working with commercial and sport fishing groups, clean energy and taxpayer advocates, businesses and conservationists to create an effective solution to the Columbia-Snake salmon crisis that will work for the entire region.

"Taking out the four lower Snake River dams and giving an endangered river a much-needed chance to recover is smart business," said Paul Fish, CEO of Mountain Gear, an outdoor retail company based in Spokane, Wash. "A restored Snake River would mean abundant salmon, more outdoor recreation and fishing opportunities, and more jobs for the Northwest. Let's restore this river so it works for people and for salmon and transform an endangered Snake River into a working Snake River."

The four U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dams and 140 miles of slackwater reservoirs block salmon and steelhead from reaching the largest and best protected high-elevation spawning and rearing habitat left in the Lower 48. Lower Granite, Little Goose, Lower Monumental and Ice Harbor dams create a hostile gauntlet of deadly turbines and warm, stagnant reservoirs full of hungry predators that have caused dramatic declines in the Snake River's salmon runs.

Every year, those dams kill as many as 90 percent of juvenile salmon and steelhead that migrate downstream to the ocean. Today, all of the river's salmon runs are either threatened with extinction or already extinct.

"Global warming is already affecting runoff patterns in the Columbia Basin," said Patty Glick, Senior Global Warming Specialist, National Wildlife Federation. "If the four lower Snake River dams remain in place, higher water temperatures and lower flows will push the region's remaining salmon and steelhead runs closer to extinction."

American Rivers and its partners are calling for the four dams to be removed in order to restore a healthy, free-flowing lower Snake River. Scientists estimate that the Snake River Basin above the four dams possesses roughly 70 percent of the salmon and steelhead restoration potential in the entire Columbia basin. This includes extensive high-elevation salmon spawning and rearing habitat in central Idaho, northeast Oregon, and southeast Washington that is likely to remain productive even in the face of a changing climate.

Restoring the lower Snake River and its salmon and steelhead would boost the regional economy by hundreds of millions thanks to the income it would generate for commercial fishing up and down the Pacific Coast, increased recreational fishing from Astoria, Oregon to Stanley, Idaho, and new boating, camping, hiking, and hunting opportunities along the scenic lower Snake River. If the four lower Snake River dams are removed to restore a free-flowing river, it would be the largest river restoration project ever undertaken.

Dam removal would also eliminate a growing flood risk in the town of Lewiston, Idaho. Sediment is accumulating behind

Lower Granite Dam, the uppermost dam on the lower Snake River, which has raised the river level and reduced the margin of safety provided by Lewiston's levees. There is too much sediment behind the dam to remove in a cost-effective and environmentally protective manner. Ultimately, taxpayers must either pay up to \$87 million to raise Lewiston's levees &mdash; and raise the roads and highways built just over the levees &mdash; or remove the dam that has created the flood risk.

The benefits the dams now provide can be replaced by other means, such as energy conservation and increased wind power capacity, while still allowing the Northwest to have affordable, carbon-free energy. As explained in a March 2009 Northwest Energy Coalition report, *Bright Future: How to keep the Northwest's lights on, jobs growing, goods moving and salmon swimming in the era of climate change*, the region has sufficient renewable energy and energy efficiency potential to cost-effectively replace the four dams' energy at the same time as it meets the much larger challenge of reducing regional global warming emissions.

The freight transportation benefits of the dams are also replaceable. Because a significant proportion of Northwest wheat farmers rely on Snake River barges to get their grain to market, dam removal will necessitate targeted upgrades to southeastern Washington's rail, highway and Columbia River barge systems.

After decades of court battle, the need for multi-stakeholder negotiations on a river and salmon restoration plan is crucial. This spring, federal district court Judge James A. Redden will rule on the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries Service's 2008 biological opinion for Columbia and Snake River salmon. That plan, developed under the Bush administration, continued the federal government's long-running attempt to fashion a salmon protection plan around status quo river and dam operations rather than adjusting operations to meet the needs of imperiled salmon.

#### About America's Most Endangered Rivers

Each year, American Rivers solicits nominations from thousands of river groups, environmental organizations, outdoor clubs, local governments, and taxpayer watchdogs for the America's Most Endangered Rivers report. The report highlights the rivers facing the most uncertain futures rather than those suffering from the worst chronic problems. The report presents alternatives to proposals that would damage rivers, identifies those who make the crucial decisions, and points out opportunities for the public to take action on behalf of each listed river.