November 2, 2017

Governor Jay Inslee
Office of the Governor
PO Box 40002
Olympia, WA 98504-0002

Dear Governor Inslee,

The undersigned conservation organizations and fishing and whale-watch business associations are writing to express our deep concern about the condition of imperiled wild salmon and steelhead populations in the Columbia-Snake River Basin and to ask for your urgent leadership. Failure to take effective action soon will doom both salmon and Southern Resident killer whales (or “orcas”) to continued, increased mortality.

Adult returns to the Columbia Basin in recent years reflect a new downward trajectory that fisheries experts predict is likely to continue for the foreseeable future without new and meaningful action to stop and reverse it.

Two primary factors are driving this steep decline today. The perennial sub-optimal conditions that confront juvenile salmon as they migrate through the reservoirs and past the dams of the federal Columbia Basin hydro-system have combined with the return of poor ocean conditions off the Pacific Northwest coast. During these episodes of low marine productivity, science shows that our dam/reservoir management policies for the Columbia and Snake rivers become even more critical for their salmon and steelhead populations.

Washington State’s wild salmon and steelhead play a defining role for our identity, culture, economy and ecology. Healthy, abundant populations are critical to the health and welfare of tribal and non-tribal fishing communities, as well as more than one hundred fish and wildlife species.

In addition, scientists have identified the loss of chinook salmon from our region’s coastal waters as a leading cause of decline for critically-endangered Southern
Resident killer whales. These orcas are known to target Chinook salmon returning to the Columbia Basin especially in the winter months but at other times of the year as well. Severe prey shortage has been implicated in recent deaths and an alarming miscarriage level. This orca community today is at a thirty-year low, as seven individuals have died in the last two years, leaving just seventy-six whales.

Sadly, experts predict that unfavorable conditions – the extremely low adult salmon returns to the Columbia Basin this year and the low productivity of our coastal marine waters – are likely to persist and possibly worsen in the next several years. This urgent situation is of tremendous concern to our millions of supporters and members. Given these circumstances, immediate additional measures are needed to help fish populations that are already facing a real risk of extinction.

“Spill” – the practice of sending water over the dams on the lower Snake and Columbia rivers in spring and summer – is one of the most effective immediate actions we can take to increase the survival of juvenile salmon and steelhead migrating to the Pacific Ocean. Most importantly, years of scientific research demonstrate that higher levels of spill lead to larger adult returns.

Right now, Washington State has an opportunity to modify its current water quality standards to allow additional spill in time for the 2018 migration, increasing the survival of ocean-bound juvenile salmon and boosting subsequent adult returns. We urge you to act quickly to modify the state’s current rules for allowable total dissolved gas to 120% in the lower Snake and lower Columbia rivers. This action is imperative for salmon and for the Southern Resident orcas. Failure to act will unnecessarily doom salmon and orcas to increased mortality.

Thank you for your careful consideration of our concerns and for your leadership on this critical issue. We look forward to working with you and your team to take advantage of this valuable opportunity.

Sincerely,

Bill Arthur, Northwest Salmon Campaign Director
Sierra Club
Seattle, Washington State

Liz Hamilton, Executive Director
Northwest Sportfishing Industry Association
Oregon City, Oregon

Joseph Bogaard, Executive Director
Save Our wild Salmon Coalition
Seattle, Washington State

Todd True, Managing Attorney
Earthjustice
Seattle, Washington State
Rein Atteman, Puget Sound Advocacy Manager
Washington Environmental Council
Seattle, Washington State

Shawn Cantrell, Regional Director
Defenders of Wildlife
Seattle, Washington State

Wendy McDermott, Director – Rivers of Puget Sound and Columbia Basin
American Rivers
Bellingham, Washington State

Jeff Friedman, U.S. President
Pacific Whale Watch Association
Friday Harbor, Washington

Joel Kawahara, Boardmember
Coastal Trollers Association
Quilcene, Washington State

Howard Garrett, Director
Orca Network
Coupeville, Washington State

Aaron Tam, Pacific Northwest Organizer
Endangered Species Coalition
Seattle, Washington State

Jonathan Stumpf, Board President
Wild Steelhead Coalition
Seattle, Washington State

Chris Wilke, Executive Director
Puget Soundkeeper Alliance
Seattle, Washington State

Mike Petersen, Executive Director
The Lands Council
Spokane, Washington State

John McGlenn, President
Washington Wildlife Federation
Bellevue, Washington State

Tom Uniack, Executive Director
Washington Wilderness Coalition
Seattle, Washington State
Elliott Moffett, President  
*Nimipuu Protecting the Environment*  
Lapwai, Idaho

Sara LaBorde, Executive Vice President  
*Wild Salmon Center*  
Portland, Oregon

Giulia Good-Stefani, Staff Attorney - Marine Mammal Protection Project  
*Natural Resources Defense Council*  
Mosier, Oregon

Tom France, Regional Executive Director  
*National Wildlife Federation*  
Missoula, Montana

Ben Enticknap, Pacific Campaign Manager and Senior Scientist  
*Ocean*  
Portland Oregon

Tom VanderPlaat, Board President  
*Association of Northwest Steelheaders*  
Milwaukie, Oregon

Lauren Goldberg, Staff Attorney  
*Columbia Riverkeeper*  
Hood River, Oregon

Grant Putnam, President  
*Northwest Guides and Anglers Association*  
Clackamas, Washington

Greg Haller, Conservation Director  
*Pacific Rivers*  
Portland, Oregon

**CC:**  
U.S. Senators for Washington State, Oregon and Idaho  
U.S. House Members for Washington State, Oregon and Idaho  
Governors of Oregon and Idaho

**Sources:**  
*Scientists’ letter to Northwest policymakers re: the benefits of increased spill to salmon and steelhead in the Columbia-Snake River Basin* (Aug. 2017)  
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