PROTECTING ORCAS FROM EXTINCTION:
What is the Lower Snake River Stakeholder Forum and why is it important to orcas and communities?

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In his 2019-2021 budget, Governor Inslee included a $1.1 billion package to support the protection and recovery of critically endangered Southern Resident orcas. As part of a comprehensive statewide strategy, the governor included an important funding request to support a facilitated forum in 2019 to initiate much-needed dialogue among key communities and stakeholders. This forum will identify and detail the types of infrastructure investments (transportation, irrigation, etc) and transitions needed if the federal government decides to remove four dams on the lower Snake River in southeast Washington.

Scientists strongly support restoring the lower Snake River and its salmon stocks.
Orca scientists have identified insufficient chinook salmon populations as the most urgent threat facing Southern Residents today. The greatest declines in chinook salmon abundance regionally have occurred in the Columbia-Snake River Basin – once among the most prolific salmon landscapes on the planet. Orcas are especially dependent on calorie-rich spring chinook that gather at the Columbia River’s mouth in winter months when other stocks are scarce.

According to salmon scientists, the Columbia Basin offers our very best salmon restoration opportunity on the West Coast. Given the basin’s historical and current importance to Southern Residents and its tremendous salmon restoration potential, it is critical that the Legislature advances salmon recovery here, including a difficult but necessary conversation about the future of the lower Snake River dams. Fully funding the Governor and Orca Task Force recommendation for a stakeholder forum is essential for policymakers and residents to understand the costs and benefits of dam removal to our communities and to be prepared for a responsible transition if it becomes necessary.

This Stakeholder Forum will complement the CRSO NEPA review currently under way.
The Stakeholder Forum must be funded and implemented as an important complement to the court-ordered, Columbia River System Operation (CRSO) NEPA review currently underway. The Forum will neither duplicate nor conflict with the CRSO federal agency-led process. The stakeholder forum will complement and support this process by providing a facilitated discussion among diverse interests in Washington about the costs and benefits of dam removal. This forum provides community members an opportunity to collaboratively develop a transition plan to ensure the region’s needs will continue to be met if the dams are to be removed. The NEPA process, however, will provide no similar opportunity. Instead, it will allow only a brief, 45-day, one-way public comment period to the federal agencies. The need for dialogue among affected stakeholders is urgent, and it is a critical step for Washington to take to ensure a future for our salmon, orcas, and communities. This forum represents an crucial opportunity to break the costly cycle of controversy and litigation that has failed to resolve these issues for more than two decades.

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“We have not had a robust discussion on how to replace services by the dams,” Inslee said. “We just need to get the facts ... I know this is a controversy, but I believe the times demand a discussion.”
-- Governor Jay Inslee, December 2018