February 1, 2019

Dear Washington Legislators,

Southern Resident Orcas, Washington State’s official marine mammal, face an extraordinary and urgent risk of extinction today. To protect and recover this community of whales, the legislature must promptly take strong action to build on the months of hard work by Governor Inslee’s Orca Recovery Task Force. The 29 undersigned organizations are writing to ask you to specifically support the Governor’s funding priorities to rebuild critically important chinook salmon populations in the Columbia Basin as part of a larger statewide plan to protect orca from extinction.

Preventing the extinction of one of our nation’s most beloved species requires a comprehensive strategy that addresses their three causes of decline (lack of prey, pollution, and noise disruption) with near- and long-term actions. Protecting, restoring and reconnecting healthy, resilient rivers and watersheds that support abundant salmon populations must be a top priority.

Orca scientists have identified insufficient chinook salmon populations as the most urgent threat facing the Southern Residents today. These whales are starving. The greatest declines in chinook salmon abundance regionally have occurred in the Columbia-Snake River Basin – once among the most prolific salmon landscape on the planet. Orcas are especially dependent on calorie-rich spring chinook salmon that gather at the Columbia River’s mouth in winter months when other stocks are scarce. The legislature must act this year to begin rebuilding robust salmon populations here as one element of a larger orca protection effort.

Last November, the Orca Task Force delivered 36 recommendations to Governor Inslee. The protection and restoration of fresh and saltwater habitat was a top priority. In December, the governor announced his orca protection plan for the 2019 legislative session and included two critical priorities for Columbia Basin salmon based on the Task Force recommendations:

(1) To increase ‘spill’ at federal dams to 125% total dissolved gas in order to significantly increase chinook salmon populations for orcas as soon as 2020. The Governor included $580,000 in his budget for the Department of Ecology to modify water quality standards as part of its interim spill agreement with the Bonneville Power Administration and others.

(2) To convene a facilitated forum that brings together affected stakeholders to identify and detail critical elements of an infrastructure transition plan in advance of a
potential decision to remove the lower Snake River dams. Governor Inslee requested $750,000 for this forum in 2019.

We strongly endorse these two elements of the Governor’s plan to protect endangered orcas and urge you fully fund them in the state’s 2019-2020 budget.

Recovering Southern Resident orcas will require short-term actions (e.g. increased spill) and long-term investments (such as barrier removal, habitat restoration, and pollution reductions) in both the Salish Sea and the Columbia Basin. Given the Columbia Basin’s historic importance to Southern Resident Orcas and its tremendous salmon restoration potential, it is critical the Legislature act to advance salmon recovery here, including the difficult but necessary conversation about the future of the lower Snake River dams. Funding the Governor and Orca Task Force recommendation for a stakeholder forum to address this issue is essential.

Providing funding for a stakeholder forum will neither duplicate nor conflict with the court-ordered CRSO EIS process now underway by federal agencies. In fact, just the opposite. As the Orca Task Force report itself explains, the stakeholder forum will complement and support this process by providing a facilitated forum for diverse interests to discuss the potential costs and benefits of dam removal and develop transition measures for affected interests. The EIS process will provide no similar opportunity. Instead, it will allow only a brief, forty-five day, one-way public comment period to the federal agencies in charge. The need for dialogue among stakeholders is urgent - the best way for Washingtonians to develop a plan for our future and for Columbia Basin salmon and Southern Resident orcas. It represents an important opportunity to break the costly cycle of controversy and litigation that has failed to resolve these issues for more than two decades.

For the sake of our endangered orcas and salmon, please support funding for increased spill and a stakeholder forum as requested by the Governor. Please contact Joseph Bogaard (joseph@wildsalmon.org; 206-300-1003) if you have questions or if we can assist in any way.

Sincerely,

Joseph Bogaard, Executive Director
Save Our wild Salmon Coalition

Robb Krehbiel, State Representative
Defenders of Wildlife

Liz Hamilton, Executive Director
Northwest Sportfishing Industry Association

Bruce Speight, Executive Director
Environment Washington

Todd True, Attorney
Earthjustice

Ben Enticknap, Senior Scientist
Oceana

Jesse Piedfort, Chapter Director
Sierra Club

Nancy Hirsh, Executive Director
NW Energy Coalition

LeeAnne Beres, Executive Director
Earth Ministry

Mike Petersen, Executive Director
The Lands Council

Elliott Moffett, President
Nimiipuu Protecting the Environment

Ann Murphy, President
League of Women Voters of Washington

Tom France, Regional Executive Director
National Wildlife Federation

Amy Carey, Executive Director
Sound Action
Donald Hyde, Vancouver Chapter President
Association of Northwest Steelheaders

Whitney Neugebauer, Director
Whale Scout

Grant Putnam, President
Northwest Guides and Anglers Association

Bill Moyer, Executive Director
Backbone Campaign

Susan Berta, Co-Director
Orca Network

Thomas O’Keefe, Northwest Regional Director
American Whitewater

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Pacific Rivers

Chase Gunnell, Board of Directors
Wild Steelhead Coalition

John McGlenn, President
Washington Wildlife Federation

Colleen Weiler, West Coast Representative
Whale and Dolphin Conservation

Wendy McDermott, Director of Puget Sound/Columbia Basin Program
American Rivers

Giulia Good Stefani, Marine Mammal Project Attorney
Natural Resources Defense Council

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Pacific Coast Federation of Fisherman’s Association
Institute for Fisheries Resources