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To the citizens of the Northwest:

Today, NOAA Fisheries is releasing its 2004 Biological Opinion (BiOp) for the Federal Columbia River Power System (FCRPS). At the same time, the federal action agencies – the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Bonneville Power Administration, and Bureau of Reclamation – have released their “Updated Proposed Action” (UPA) that describes actions these agencies will carry out over the next 10 years to help threatened and endangered salmon.

These documents have been developed to respond to a Federal District Court’s concern that actions to protect endangered species must be “reasonably certain to occur.” The BiOp and UPA clearly identify remedial actions for each species and provide tools to measure results. The BiOp and UPA actions build on the momentum of the current \$600 million annual federal effort to implement the existing 2000 BiOp and to support the broader purpose of long-term recovery. With the help of favorable ocean conditions, these and other regional efforts have already led to dramatic results. Adult returns in the Columbia and Snake Rivers are up significantly for nearly all of the salmon and steelhead stocks listed under the Endangered Species Act.

The 2004 BiOp and UPA assure that federal actions will continue on all fronts. The UPA continues the actions we have been taking in recent years and adds promising new actions such as more natural fish-passage for juvenile fish at the dams. It defines the specific measures the agencies will take to offset the effect of hydro operations by addressing limitations in tributaries, restoring estuary habitat, increasing predator control, and improving hatchery production.

We recognize some have concerns with the approach taken in the BiOp and we believe it’s important to understand our approach. First, the BiOp does not suggest that dams result in no damage to salmon. Rather, it concludes that the negative effects of operating the FCRPS dams and reservoirs will be offset by the additional efforts in the UPA, resulting in little or no net impact. We believe this approach—analyzing the effects of the proposed action—is consistent with existing law and standards used in BiOps across the country.

Second, this approach does not represent a reduction in our commitment to salmon recovery nor an attempt to shift the financial burden of recovery to other parties in the region. We, like many in the region, are concerned about long-term recovery of salmon in the Columbia River Basin and in the Northwest and recognize our larger obligation to recovery beyond the measures in the opinion.

The BiOp and UPA represent a new beginning rather than an end. The protections established in a BiOp are an important foundation for long-term recovery of a listed species, and our agencies remain committed to that effort. Recovery will clearly require additional improvements that go beyond actions that merely avoid jeopardy.

The ESA process calls for development of *recovery plans* that describe the actions that would lead to a species no longer requiring protection and its removal from the ESA list. A recovery plan describes the involvement of local citizens, municipalities, private landowners, and state, tribal and federal agencies to promote self-sustaining populations of the species.

A remarkable one-and-a-half year collaboration among these groups recently produced draft fish and wildlife plans for 59 subbasins in the Columbia River Basin. Literally hundreds of people were involved in subbasin planning. These locally-developed subbasin plans, spearheaded by the Northwest Power and Conservation Council, represent a new threshold of understanding about fish and wildlife and their habitat. They will contribute significantly to recovery planning for threatened and endangered species in the Columbia River Basin.

Also, the federal agencies have other legal obligations such as Trust and Treaty obligations, the Northwest Power Act, Pacific Coast Salmon Recovery Fund, Mitchell Act, Lower Snake River Compensation Plan, and the Yakima River Basin Water Enhancement Program, which create broader responsibilities to undertake actions to restore salmon in ways that go well beyond the requirements of the ESA. Nothing in this BiOp is intended to diminish those responsibilities.

The challenge for our region will be to integrate the good work that's been done and the substantial progress we've made into solid recovery plans that describe how we will work together. The federal agencies are committed to working with all regional parties to build on these efforts and to develop and implement recovery plans. This work will call for us to better align the many resources that we have available and make the best use of those resources. It will call for the many entities involved to agree on priorities. If we can do this, the region can be assured that we are investing wisely in the future.

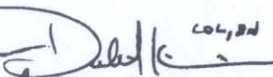
Every citizen in the Pacific Northwest has a stake in this work. Salmon are a cultural icon and provide important economic benefits to our region. The federal hydropower system provides approximately 40 percent of the region's electric power as well as flood control, irrigation, navigation and recreation--all of which provide enormous benefit to the Pacific Northwest. If we are to be successful we must work together to support our twin goals of a healthy environment and a strong economy.


We encourage all the stakeholders in the region – to now embark with us on this next step toward recovery of salmon and steelhead.

Sincerely,

 ^{COL, USN}

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