

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 21, 2023

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Biden:

We are writing to discuss our concerns regarding your recent actions relating to the Columbia River and its tributaries. On September 27, 2023 you issued a “Memorandum on Restoring Healthy and Abundant Salmon, Steelhead, and Other Native Fish Populations in the Columbia River Basin,” a directive to the federal government to take additional steps to restore Northwest salmon. As part of that directive, you called for a new federal partnership with Tribes and states to advance salmon restoration. While the goal of salmon restoration is laudable and a goal we share, we are writing to share our concerns with how this one sided action would affect our constituents and ignores Congress’s authority.

First, we must underscore that the Columbia River system is complex and regional, and central to many aspects of our way of life in the Northwest. Clean, baseload, renewable hydropower is the economic engine that powers much of the region. Dam infrastructure provides for vital irrigation and transportation for agricultural products that feed our nation and the world. Further, the operations of dams throughout the system protect communities from flooding, and the river system supports tribal, commercial, and sport fishing.

The region has a long history of working together to forge consensus positions. That genuine regional consensus is essential for determining an implementable path forward that is sustainable, durable, and successful. Unless all parties are at the table and their opinions are given equal weight, any resulting “agreement” will fail.

Second, we remind you that Congress – and Congress alone – can change the authorized purposes of federal dams and determine their future. Recent history has shown repeatedly that Congress is unwilling to drastically alter the operations of the Columbia River system or remove the lower Snake River dams. Language was removed from the Senate version of the 2022 Water Resources Development Act that called for an ecosystem study because of concern it was the first step towards consideration of breaching the lower Snake River dams. Similarly, bipartisan hydropower legislation in the Senate includes language to reject the breaching of any of the dams on the lower Snake River. Your administration has recognized its understanding that only

Congress has the ability to authorize dam removal,¹ yet recent activities indicate the possibility for actions that have been rejected by Congress and lack scientific grounding. This distracts from the opportunity to find genuine consensus and actually conduct effective salmon conservation.

Recent salmon return numbers underscore that the policies implemented by past administrations—Democrat and Republican—are working. Moreover, the data shows that ocean conditions, not in-river migration, are the critical determinant in salmon survival and recovery².

Rather than focusing attention on controversial proposals that won't be implemented by Congress or plans that have buy-in from only a limited portion of those who rely on the river system, we urge you to return to efforts that build on regional consensus, are grounded in science, and can be supported and implemented by Congress.

Sincerely,



James E. Risch
United States Senator



Steve Daines
United States Senator



Mike Crapo
United States Senator

¹Columbia River Salmon and Other Native Fish Request for Information, 88 Fed. Reg. 28532 (May 4, 2023) (request for information) <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2023/05/04/2023-09525/columbia-river-salmon-and-other-native-fish-request-for-information>

² Richard Beamish, The need to see a bigger picture to understand the ups and downs of Pacific salmon abundances, *ICES Journal of Marine Science*, Volume 79, Issue 4, May 2022, Pages 1005–1014, <https://doi.org/10.1093/icesjms/fsac036>