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Protecting and Restoring the Rivers and Fish of Idaho

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Salmon advocates seek emergency protections for taxpayers and fish

BOISE — Pacific Northwest salmon advocates filed in federal district court late yesterday, Jan. 10, to seek implementation of emergency measures to protect endangered salmon, as well as taxpayers, while federal agencies conduct long-term analyses of federal dams and the impact they have on salmon.

Specifically, IRU, the state of Oregon and other conservation groups, with support from the Nez Perce Tribe, asked the court to suspend federal spending on 11 capital projects and to order more water spilled over dams to assist migrating salmon.

“For 20 years Idahoans have been frustrated by the federal government's failure to deliver actions that work for salmon and the people who depend on them,” said IRU Executive Director Kevin Lewis. “This filing is to protect salmon and prevent the federal government from stonewalling real progress in the Pacific Northwest and Idaho.”

The request follows a May 4, 2016 ruling by Judge Michael Simon, who ordered that a federal salmon plan called a biological opinion was illegal and must be rewritten. Simon also ordered federal agencies to conduct a separate five-year National Environmental Policy Act study that includes lower Snake River dam removal as an option.

IRU and allied organizations are seeking to suspend federal spending on 11 capital projects at the dams. The groups are specifically targeting infrastructure projects that are not related to health and safety and that do not aid with salmon passage. The idea is to save American taxpayers upward of \$100 million that will not need to be spent if the lower Snake River dams are removed.

“Spending more than a hundred million dollars on federal dams that won’t be there if we take appropriate measures to restore wild salmon doesn’t make sense,” Lewis said. “These kinds of investments should be suspended to ensure a level playing field for all of the alternatives agencies must consider, including the alternative of lower Snake River dam removal.”

Spill has been in place on the lower Snake and Columbia rivers by court order since 2005. What that does is help the system of reservoirs work more like a river. More fish pass over, as opposed to through, the dams, and scientists estimate that more spill as requested in the injunction request will boost salmon survival by a quarter to a third.

“The increased spill we’re asking for isn’t enough to actually restore wild salmon, but it’s an important and positive step we can take today while federal agencies work to comply with the court’s ruling requiring legal salmon plan by 2021,” Lewis said.

The four lower Snake River dams represent a minor and easily replaced component of the Northwest energy grid, yet continue to pose a major obstacle to survival of endangered salmon. Since a federal comment period opened in late September more than a quarter million supporters have formally submitted comments calling on federal agencies to remove the four lower Snake River dams.

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