



FRIENDS OF THE CLEARWATER

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President Barack Obama
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Obama,

Friends of the Clearwater works to protect the public wildlands, waterways and native wildlife of the Clearwater Basin in north-central Idaho. The Clearwater Basin contains the largest remaining complex of undeveloped wildlands in the lower 48. Between the 1.3-million acre Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness and another 1.5-million acres of unprotected roadless wildlands, this very special place contains approximately 3-million acres of undeveloped public lands, and provides critical habitat for many species, including imperiled Chinook salmon and steelhead.

Historically, tens of thousands of wild Chinook and steelhead returned on an annual basis to the Clearwater Basin in search of their native spawning grounds. In the late 20th Century, wild salmon and steelhead populations began declining due to a number of reasons, including the construction of dams along the Columbia River. Wild fish populations declined even further, following the construction of the lower four Snake River dams in southeast Washington: Ice Harbor, Lower Monumental, Little Goose and Lower Granite.

The best available science today suggests that, indeed, the biggest obstacle to the biological recovery of wild salmon and steelhead are the lower four Snake River dams. As you are aware, we have legal obligations to recover these species under the Endangered Species Act, and treaty responsibilities with First Nations, like the Nez Perce Tribe. One could argue we also have moral obligations to save these species.

In 2002, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completed the *Lower Snake River Juvenile Salmon Migration Feasibility Study*. Despite the opinions of many scientists, engineers, tribal officials and concerned citizens, the Corps issued a decision that kept the dams in place, opting for *System Improvements*, which in theory, would enhance salmon/smolt migration and give the species the best and quickest hope for survival, without reservoir(s) drawdown.

Twenty-years later, and with over \$600-million dollars spent in an attempt to improve fish passage, wild salmon and steelhead returns remain threatened with extinction. According to the Fish Passage Center, over the last decade, 52% of smolts (wild salmon) and 49% of smolts (wild steelhead) survive under the current river system. In 2013, the NOAA Fisheries stated, "Chinook survival through the hydropower system has remained relatively stable since 1999 with the exception of lower estimates in 2001 and 2004." This means that despite the investment of hundreds of millions of American taxpayer dollars, and

the best efforts of the Corps, their 2002 decision has failed to improve wild salmon and steelhead migration. Today less than 1% of adult wild Chinook survive the complex of dams on the Columbia and lower Snake Rivers.

A main reason for the construction of the lower Snake River dams was to provide a navigable inland waterway for commerce. According to the Army Corps of Engineers Waterborne Commerce of the United States website, however, freight transportation (volume) on the lower Snake River over the last two decades has declined by almost 70%. Closer examination reveals that freight transportation from the Port of Lewiston in Idaho, which is responsible for the only containerized freight shipped on the waterway, has declined by over 80%. Just last week, the Port of Lewiston suspended indefinitely container shipments.

The lower four Snake River dams produce very little electricity. Hydroelectric production by these dams equates to a meager 4% of all hydroelectricity produced in the Pacific Northwest. Wind power in the region now more than doubles hydroelectric output on the lower Snake River. Energy production from these dams has already been replaced.

Nationally, the Corps of Engineers maintains and operates an extensive network of aging dams, locks, levees and other infrastructure. Summoned to perform a report in 2010 on the Corps future financial options, the National Academy of Science concluded that the agency was in an “unsustainable situation” and was “facing increased frequency of infrastructure failure and negative social, economic and public safety consequences.” The report further recommended divestiture or decommissioning of parts of Corps-operated projects.

The Army Corps of Engineers has a classification system for freight transport on U.S. waterways. The categories range from “high use” to “medium use” to “negligible use.” Data suggests that .3 billion ton-miles of freight is transported annually on the lower Snake River, putting it in the Corps “negligible use” category. Based on the National Academy of Science’s recommendation for future divestiture, and the Corps’ classification of the lower Snake as a “negligible use” waterway, the lower four Snake River dams are, therefore, a strong candidate for decommissioning.

Friends of the Clearwater is a firm advocate for breaching of the lower four Snake River dams. Besides biological, legal and ethical considerations, we argue that breaching makes complete sense from a sustainability and economic standpoint. The American taxpayer should not have to pay over \$200 million annually to maintain infrastructure on a waterway that has never delivered the socio-economic benefits promised when the dams/reservoirs were built in the first place. Fast-forward fifty years, and it makes even less sense for the American taxpayer and the Army Corps of Engineers to continue to invest in a waterway that is classified as “negligible use.”

The time to be bold and make informed decisions on the continued operation and maintenance of our nation’s waterways is now. We hope this letter serves as a catalyst for greater scrutiny of the aging infrastructure on the lower Snake River.

Thank you very much for your time.

Sincerely,

Brett Haverstick
Education & Outreach Director

