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Protecting and Restoring the Rivers and Fish of Idaho

April 23, 2015

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

Dear President Obama,

For the past 20 years Idaho Rivers United has been working with a diverse array of citizens, partner organizations and local businesses to restore endangered salmon and steelhead to Idaho. Although salmon restoration is the specific goal, the majority of scientists agree that the only way to achieve Endangered Species Act delisting is to remove four high-cost, low-value dams on the lower Snake River in eastern Washington State. Increasingly it is also clear that these dams are an unnecessary drain on federal coffers while providing very small societal benefits. There are smarter ways for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Bonneville Power Administration and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to spend more than \$13 billion of taxpayer and rate payer dollars—and counting. We’re writing to ask for your leadership to break the political gridlock.

Historically, millions of chinook, sockeye and coho salmon, as well as steelhead, returned annually to the upper Snake River basin and abundant spawning grounds in wild central Idaho—the world’s longest and hardest salmon migration. In the 1950s, though diminished by over-fishing and dam construction on the lower Columbia, these species continued to return in self-sustaining numbers. Construction of the lower Snake River dams in the 1960s and 1970s, however, caused dramatic population declines that led to extinction of coho salmon and listing of all other Snake River species under the Endangered Species Act.

In 2002 the Army Corps completed the Lower Snake river Juvenile Salmon Migration Feasibility Report to examine alternatives for recovering endangered wild salmon. Although the Corps’ own scientists and engineers found ample economic justification to support dam breaching, the agency opted to implement “System Improvements” to attempt enhancing salmon survival at the dams. These measures included trucking fish around dams and installing “fish-friendly weirs,” to name two. But 20 years later, with practically zero improvement to salmon returns, it’s clear that this \$600 million experiment has failed.

The most effective practice to mitigate salmon mortality at the dams—spilling water over dams during the spring and summer migration seasons—has been achieved only by court order and over the objection of federal hydro system managers. Despite a long and expensive record of failure, federal salmon biological opinions issued by NOAA Fisheries, with clear influence from

other federal agencies, continue to ignore the lethal effects of Columbia and Snake river dams and have been overturned or remanded by federal judges nearly a half dozen times over 20 years.

Facts belie federal victory claims. Recovery is nowhere near at hand. In fact, the federal government's own scientists acknowledge that long-term productivity for nearly every listed stock is flat or continues to decline, and meeting Endangered Species Act recovery thresholds (some official, others not yet codified) are nowhere near in sight.

The primary reason the lower Snake River dams were built was to establish a navigable inland waterway for commerce that would facilitate economic prosperity for the port cities of Lewiston, Idaho and Clarkston, Washington, as well as for north Idaho and eastern Washington farmers. Shipping activity peaked in the 1990s and has been on a steady and rather dramatic decline ever since. Farmers and local industries are increasingly moving goods via truck and railroad.

According to the Corps' Waterborne Commerce of the United States website freight transportation on the lower Snake has declined 69 percent in 20 years as measured at Ice Harbor Dam, the lowest dam in the system. Container freight at the Port of Lewiston, which provides the only containerized freight shipping on the waterway, had declined more than 80 percent by March 2015. In April 2015, the Port of Lewiston suspended all container shipments indefinitely. These statistics put the lower Snake River well below the Corps' category of a waterway of "negligible use."

The second reason the lower Snake River dams were built was to generate hydropower. While the four dams have a combined nameplate capacity of 3,033 megawatts, they rarely reach that capacity and have extremely limited ability to meet demand during emergencies. The dams produce on average 961 annual megawatts, but because they are run-of-river dams with very little storage capacity, they produce the most electricity during peak runoff in May and June when it's needed the least. When air conditioners and irrigation pumps are running in July and August the dams produce about 25 percent of their June performance.

Moreover, electricity produced at the four lower Snake River dams has already been replaced many times over by conservation, energy efficacy upgrades, wind power, and a growing solar industry that promises to overshadow the insignificance of the lower Snake River dams even further.

Nationally, the Corps maintains an extensive network of aging dams, locks, levees and other infrastructure. The National Academy of Science in 2010 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."

In short, the lower Snake River dams are a failure. Billions of taxpayer dollars have been squandered and Idaho's iconic salmon and steelhead have been driven to the brink of extinction to support nearly non-existent waterborne commerce and low-value hydropower generation.

The Corps of Engineers has existing authority to evaluate the performance of its projects and ultimately shift funding to projects that provide greater economic and societal value to this country.

Now, more than ever, your leadership is needed to put an end to this decades-long cycle of taxpayer waste and destruction of prized natural resources. You can lead the restoration of Idaho's salmon and steelhead, meet America's treaty obligations to First Nations and stop the unnecessary drain of taxpayer dollars. At the same time, your leadership on this issue can re-allocate precious infrastructure funding to more deserving waterway projects in the Pacific Northwest. Now is the time to move forward to breach the four lower Snake River dams, and Idaho Rivers United respectfully asks for your help.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kevin Lewis", written in a cursive style. The signature is positioned above a horizontal line.

Kevin Lewis, Conservation Director
Idaho Rivers United