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32 Pacific Northwest Groups Urge U.S. to Take Action to Modernize the Columbia River Treaty to Avoid Ecosystem Collapse

Seattle, Washington – Today, 32 Pacific Northwest-based conservation, clean energy, faith, fishing, and civic organizations sent [a letter](#) to the State Department and other key federal agencies urging the U.S. to inform the region on efforts to overhaul the 1964 U.S.-Canada Columbia River Treaty (“Treaty”) and involve citizens and tribes in decisions about its future. While negotiations are confidential, the organizations note that Canada has maintained robust ongoing communication with its citizens and is working in full partnership with Indigenous nations. The U.S. Negotiating Team has not held a public meeting in over 2.5 years and provides only infrequent and minimal written updates.

Joseph Bogaard, Executive Director for the Save Our wild Salmon Coalition, said:

“Save Our wild Salmon joins many other organizations to remind our leaders that Northwest people care deeply about the health of the Columbia River, and that we expect to be informed and involved in decisions that affect its health and future. The lack of meaningful public engagement by U.S. Treaty negotiators is concerning. We are worried about the potential for rushed decision-making without public dialogue or involvement - and asking the Biden Administration for much greater transparency as we move forward. Canada has shown that robust public engagement is possible while also respecting the confidentiality of negotiations.”

The current, 58-year-old Treaty has only two priorities: maximizing hydropower production and engineered flood control. The organizations are calling on U.S. leaders to add Ecosystem Function – the health of the river and its ecosystems – as a third primary purpose of the Treaty. With escalating climate impacts like flooding, heat waves, wildfires, and rivers too hot for salmon and other fish, it is essential that the operation of the Columbia Basin hydrosystem be updated to maximize resilience of the watershed and the communities that depend on it. The Treaty plays a significant role in shaping river flows and dam operations across the basin as more than a third of the Columbia’s water comes from Canada, including some of its coldest and most climate resilient sources. Among other positive changes, prioritizing Ecosystem Function means ensuring that fish have sufficient river flows in spring and early summer, especially in low to average water years.

Brian Brooks, Executive Director for the Idaho Wildlife Federation, said:

“Our salmon, and all of us who depend on them, face an existential threat as the Columbia River and its tributaries continue to warm. This summer's extreme heat has - again - made the threat plain. Northwest sportsmen and women need a modern Columbia River Treaty that helps tackle this challenge. The United States' Treaty Negotiating Team must craft an agreement with Canada that adds 'Ecosystem Function', the health of the Columbia and Snake Rivers, as a third Treaty purpose.”

The two countries have been in negotiations to update - or 'modernize' - the Columbia River Treaty for over four years. If a new agreement is not reached within two years of **this Friday September 16th**, the terms of the current Treaty will shift responsibility for flood control south of the border from Canada to the U.S., potentially forcing major operational changes at eight dams and reservoirs located in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana. Given the lack of transparency to date, signatories on the letter are increasingly worried about how the federal government will deal with uncertainties and operational changes while protecting fish and wildlife, honoring tribal treaty obligations, and supporting river communities.

The signatories also call on Canada to work expeditiously with the U.S. to find agreement on a modernized Treaty that benefits both sides of the watershed for decades to come. The Columbia is one river and the two countries it flows through face a shared future. Notably, federal, provincial, and Indigenous governments in Canada are pursuing the reintroduction of salmon to blocked areas with great public support. The success of this effort depends on the health of downstream river conditions and salmon runs in the U.S.

John DeVoe, Executive Director for WaterWatch of Oregon, said:

“Modernizing the Columbia River Treaty presents a once in a generation opportunity to reduce the impacts of flood control on the river that binds all of us together. Today, Canada stores vast quantities of water in massive reservoirs behind huge dams. Coordinated flood risk management through the Treaty expires in just two years, abruptly shifting responsibility from Canada to reservoirs in the U.S. This is not how U.S. dams have operated. We lack comprehensive plans for this change. And, we have grave concerns that federal agencies will further de-prioritize the health of fish and wildlife in order to manage flood risk. Upsetting operations for fish and wildlife, agriculture, hydropower, and other river uses due to inadequate planning and minimal consultation is an unnecessary - and unacceptable - outcome.”

The signing organizations are asking the public to help send a strong message to the Biden Administration and Northwest members of Congress at this crucial time. The recently launched ColumbiaRiverTreaty.org website includes a tool citizens can use to quickly send letters to federal agencies involved in the Treaty negotiations, as well as more background information. The organizations will also be hosting [a webinar](#) on Tuesday October 4th for those who'd like to learn more.

Commenting on the moral imperative to make change, **Jessica Zimmerle**, Advocacy Director for Earth Ministry/Washington Interfaith Power and Light said:

“In the faith community we’re reflecting on how limiting the Columbia River Treaty to flood control and power generation embodies the antiquated mindset of human domination over nature. To truly modernize the Treaty, we must shift to an approach that centers stewardship and justice. Adding Ecosystem Function as a primary purpose and prioritizing governance by Indigenous sovereigns will put us on a path toward reconciliation with creation and one another.”

The U.S. NGO Treaty Caucus is an alliance of Northwest-based civic, faith, energy, and conservation organizations working for a modernized Columbia River Treaty that will serve our region’s diverse needs now and into the future. Core members include the Center for Environmental Law and Policy, Earth Ministry/Washington Interfaith Power & Light, League of Women Voters of Washington, Natural Resource Defense Council, Northwest Energy Coalition, Save Our wild Salmon Coalition, Sierra Club, and WaterWatch of Oregon.

Complete list of organizations that signed the letter: American Rivers, Association of Northwest Steelheaders, Audubon Society of Portland, Center for Biological Diversity, Center for Environmental Law and Policy, Columbia Riverkeeper, Earth Ministry/Washington Interfaith Power & Light, Endangered Species Coalition, Engineers for a Sustainable Future, Faith Action Network, Federation of Western Outdoor Clubs, Great Old Broads for Wilderness, Idaho Conservation League, Idaho Rivers United, Idaho Wildlife Federation, Institute for Fisheries Resources, National Wildlife Federation, Northwest Guides and Anglers Association, Northwest Sportfishing Industry Association, NW Energy Coalition, Oregon Coast Alliance, Oregon League of Conservation Voters, Oregon Wild, Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen’s Associations, Save Our wild Salmon Coalition, Sierra Club, Spokane Riverkeeper, Washington Wildlife Federation, WaterWatch of Oregon, Whale Scout, Wild Orca, Wild Steelhead Coalition

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