

Biden Has a Chance to Oversee Biggest River Restoration Project in U.S. History

From [Amy Soeurs Kober, Earth/Food/Life a project of the Independent Media Institute](#)

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Removing four dams on the lower Snake River would provide salmon and steelhead access to more than 5,000 miles of pristine habitat. Photo: Alison Meyer Photography

It's hard to put into words what wild salmon mean to the Pacific Northwest. They are the heartbeat of the region's rivers, and the annual return of salmon from the Pacific Ocean helps sustain a web of life in the Columbia River Basin that includes more than [130 species](#), from eagles to black bears to [orcas](#). These incredible fish have been a [cornerstone of Indigenous cultures](#) for thousands of years.

“Our story, and that of the salmon, is one of perseverance and resilience and thriving,” [said](#) Dr. Sammy Matsaw, a Shoshone-Bannock tribal member, veteran and co-founder of the nonprofit [River Newe](#). “We’re still here and we’re still strong. This is about who we are and who we want to be.”

Migrations are common among many species, but the journey that the salmon make is one of the most amazing. Salmon hatch from eggs laid in the gravel of clear, cold mountain streams. After hatching, the young salmon ride swift river currents downstream to the ocean. Their bodies undergo amazing physiological changes as they transition from living in freshwater to saltwater. And then they eventually go back to freshwater: After a couple of years in the ocean, the adult salmon find their way back to the same spawning beds in the same rivers where they were born.

Idaho salmon make one of the world's most epic migrations, [swimming](#) 900 miles and climbing over a mile in elevation from the Pacific Ocean up the [Columbia and Snake Rivers](#) to mountain streams where they spawn and die, beginning the circle of life again.

Strong salmon runs power local economies and allow [businesses to thrive](#).

But salmon runs in the Columbia and Snake Rivers [are in trouble](#), in large part because of the damage to their natural habitat by [hydropower dams](#).

‘Inexcusable’

The Snake River was historically the biggest salmon producer in the Columbia Basin, with an estimated “2 million to 6 million fish... [returning to] the Snake River and its tributaries” each year, according to Russ Thurow, a fisheries research scientist with the U.S. Forest Service’s Rocky Mountain Research Station in Boise, Idaho, who was [quoted](#) in the Idaho Mountain Express. But “[b]y 1995, [only 1,200 wild Chinook reached the Snake River basin](#),” said Thurow.

According to [scientists](#), the steep decline in the wild Snake River salmon population can be attributed to the construction of the four lower Snake River dams in eastern Washington, [built](#) “between 1955 and 1975 to turn the inland town of Lewiston, Idaho, into a seaport.” These four federally owned and operated dams have caused a precipitous decline in wild salmon and steelhead trout in the Snake River Basin, driving some populations to [extinction](#) and landing the rest on the endangered species list. “Sockeye salmon from the Snake River system are probably the most endangered salmon,” [according to](#) the U.S. Geological Survey. “Coho salmon in the lower Columbia River may already be extinct.”



The \$33.5 billion proposal by Congressman Mike Simpson (R-ID) includes what would be the biggest river restoration project in history. Photo: Alison Meyer Photography

As Chinook salmon grow ever more scarce, they are pulling another Northwest icon—Southern Resident orcas—toward extinction. This population of orcas migrates back and forth between Puget Sound, the Salish Sea and the Washington and Oregon coasts. One of the main factors for the Southern Resident orcas being [critically endangered](#) is the lack of food, with Chinook salmon making up “more than 80 percent of their diet.” In the U.S., the Columbia-Snake River watershed is the [most important source](#) of salmon for orcas. The four lower Snake River dams not only interrupt the free-flowing water but also [kill](#) “millions of Chinook juveniles” as the salmon attempt to make their way to the ocean.

One orca mother, [Tahlequah](#), made national news in 2018 when she carried the body of her dead calf for 17 days. The region mourned with her. The heartbreak galvanized people across the Northwest to demand solutions.

Over the past 20 years, the federal government and Northwest taxpayers have made massive investments in salmon recovery in the Columbia-Snake River Basin, totaling [more than \\$17 billion](#). These actions,

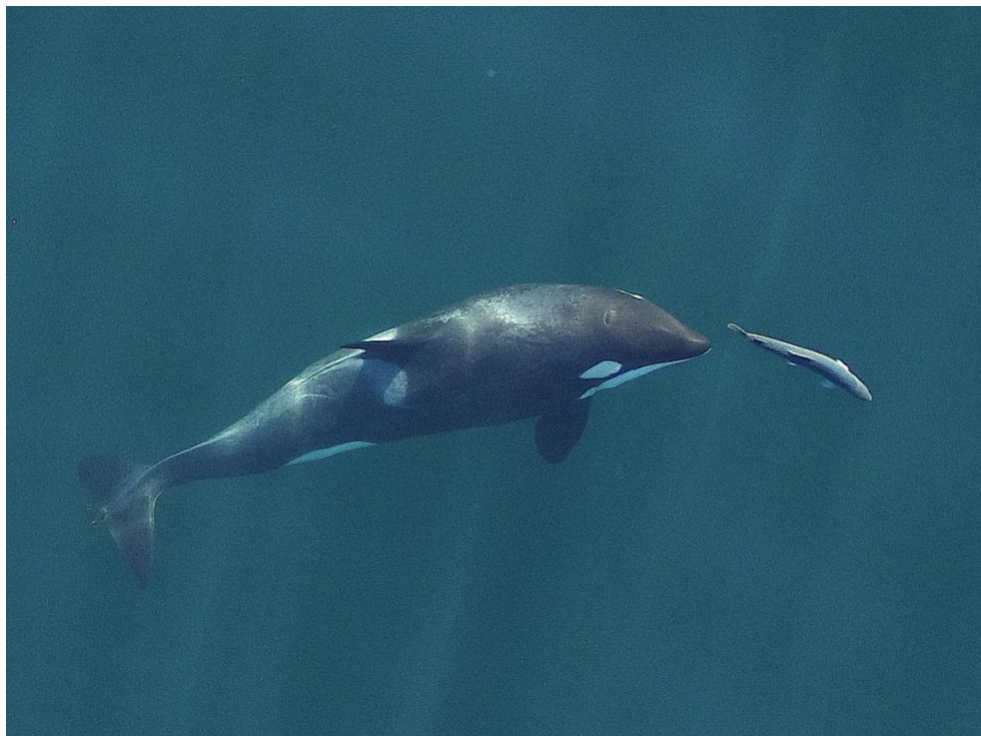
including modifications to dam operations, have been necessary to reverse the impacts of historic habitat loss, overharvest, and the damage caused by hydropower projects, but have not been sufficient to recover salmon and steelhead to healthy, harvestable and sustainable numbers.

In the short documentary film [The Greatest Migration](#) by [Save Our Wild Salmon](#), Ed Bowles, who has run the fish division of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife for the past two decades, said, “Historically, the Columbia River was the biggest salmon producer in the world... We are now struggling at around 1 percent of their historical potential. That is inexcusable for a system that is so iconic, a species that is so iconic, a system that is so magnificent.”

‘We Choose Salmon’

For decades, Northwest tribes have been spearheading salmon recovery solutions in the Columbia-Snake River Basin and regionwide. The [Nimípuu, or Nez Percé, Tribe](#) adopted its first resolution [advocating](#) for the removal of the four lower Snake River dams in 1999. Removing these dams would [restore](#) 140 miles of the lower Snake River and improve [access](#) to more than 5,000 miles of pristine habitat in places like Idaho’s Salmon and Clearwater River systems.

In a 2020 [statement](#), Shannon F. Wheeler, then chairman of the Nez Percé Tribal Executive Committee, said, “We view restoring the lower Snake River as urgent and overdue. To us, the lower Snake River is a living being, and, as stewards, we are compelled to speak the truth on behalf of this life force and the impacts these concrete barriers on the lower Snake have on salmon, steelhead, and lamprey, on a diverse ecosystem, on our Treaty-reserved way of life, and on our people.”



A young southern resident orca chases a Chinook salmon in the Salish Sea near San Juan Island, Washington, in September 2017. Without this primary food source, the critically endangered whales face extinction. (Photo credit: Holly Fearnbach, SR3: SeaLife Response, Rehabilitation and Research; and Lance Barrett-Lennard, Vancouver Aquarium’s Coastal Ocean Research Institute via NOAA. Source: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/feature-story/prioritizing-west-coast-chinook-salmon-stocks-southern-resident-killer-whale-recovery>)

Today, tribal leaders are raising their voices again. In May 2021, the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians—a group representing 57 Northwest tribal governments—[passed a resolution](#) calling for the breaching of the lower Snake dams. The [resolution](#) calls on Congress and the Biden administration to “seize the once-in-a-lifetime congressional opportunity to invest in salmon and river restoration in the Pacific Northwest, charting a stronger, better future for the Northwest, and bringing long-ignored tribal justice to our peoples and homelands.”

“Restoring the lower Snake River will allow salmon, steelhead and lamprey to flourish in the rivers and streams of the Snake Basin,” said Kat Brigham, chair of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) Board of Trustees in a February 8 [press release](#). “This has long been a priority because these are the CTUIR’s ancestral traditional use areas, such as the Grande Ronde, Imnaha, Lostine, Minam, Tucannon and Wallowa Rivers and their tributaries.”

“We have reached a tipping point where we must choose between our Treaty-protected salmon and the federal dams, and we choose salmon,” Yakama Nation Tribal Council Chairman Delano Saluskin, was quoted [saying](#) in a press release.

‘America’s Most Endangered River’

My organization, American Rivers, [named](#) the Snake River “America’s Most Endangered River for 2021” because of the urgent need for action to save the salmon—and the opportunity to come up with a bold, comprehensive solution. In February, Congressman Mike Simpson (R-Idaho) [proposed](#) a \$33.5 billion package of infrastructure investments, including removing the lower Snake dams, to recover salmon runs and boost clean energy, agriculture and transportation across the region.

Showing his personal compassion toward the cause of salmon recovery, Simpson described salmon as “the most incredible creatures, I think, that God has created,” according to a [2019 article](#).

Meanwhile, a presentation [titled](#), “The Northwest in Transition: Salmon, Dams and Energy,” on Simpson’s website states, “The question I am asking the Northwest delegation, governors, tribes and stakeholders is ‘do we want to roll up our sleeves and come together to find a solution to save our salmon, protect our stakeholders and reset our energy system for the next 50 plus years on our terms?’ Passing on this opportunity will mean we are letting the chips fall where they may for some judge, future administration or future [C]ongress to decide our fate on their terms. They will be picking winners and losers, not creating solutions.”



“Our story, and that of the salmon, is one of perseverance and resilience and thriving,” said Dr. Sammy Matsaw, a Shoshone-Bannock tribal member, veteran and co-founder of the nonprofit River Newe. Photo: Becca Skinner

Since Simpson released his proposal, other members of the Northwest congressional delegation have joined the conversation. In May, Congressman Earl Blumenauer (D-Oregon) [spoke](#) in favor of a comprehensive solution, saying, “People in the Pacific Northwest [need to] engage with one another.”

“Let’s dive in and do it rather than pretend that somehow this is going to go away. ... That’s just not going to cut it,” he said.

Senator Patty Murray (D-Washington) and Washington Governor Jay Inslee also released a [statement](#) in favor of a collaborative, comprehensive solution for salmon and the region.

No matter which proposal ultimately gains traction, American Rivers and other salmon advocates believe that we need meaningful immediate action and funding to remove the lower Snake dams and replace their benefits. Prioritizing the following five goals is essential to long-term solutions for salmon recovery and improving the present Northwest infrastructure:

1. Healthy rivers, abundant salmon: Restoration of the lower Snake River, along with the funding and implementation of habitat restoration and fish protection projects, will provide the most favorable river conditions possible for salmon, steelhead and other native fish species.

2. Honoring promises to tribes: Restoring abundant, harvestable salmon will honor the promises made to Northwest tribes by upholding their right to access fish and will benefit tribes from the inland Northwest to the coast.

3. Prosperous agriculture: Infrastructure upgrades will ensure irrigation from a free-flowing lower Snake River continues to support the farms that currently rely on surface diversions and wells for their orchards, vineyards and other high-value crops. Investments in the transportation system will allow farmers, who currently ship their grain to market using river barges, to transport their products via rail.

4. Affordable, reliable clean energy: The energy currently produced by the four lower Snake River dams can be replaced by a clean energy portfolio that includes solar, wind, energy efficiency and storage. Diversifying energy sources will improve the electric system’s reliability. Funding for energy storage, grid resiliency and optimization would allow the Northwest to maintain its legacy of clean and affordable energy.

5. Revitalizing the economy: Infrastructure investments in energy and transportation would mean more family-wage jobs, the impact of which ripples out in communities throughout the region. A restored lower Snake River would strengthen local economies by creating new opportunities for outdoor recreation, which will help support local businesses, including outfitters, lodging and restaurants.

A Once-in-a-Lifetime Opportunity

Time is of the essence. Climate change is [warming Northwest rivers](#), creating deadly conditions for endangered salmon. Meanwhile, [the salmon runs continue to decline](#). Northwest tribes have called for a major salmon summit this summer to underscore the urgency of these issues.

It is time for bold action from Northwest leaders. The region’s congressional delegation has a strong history of crafting innovative, bipartisan solutions to challenging water and river issues. And we’ve seen powerful, collaborative dam removal efforts come together on other rivers across the country, from Maine’s Penobscot to Oregon and California’s Klamath. Now, with President Biden [considering](#) a national infrastructure package, the government has an opportunity to secure significant regional investment—and advance the biggest river restoration effort the world has ever seen. A well-crafted solution on a swift timeline would benefit the nation as a whole by restoring salmon runs, bolstering clean energy and strengthening the economy of one of the most dynamic regions in the country.

It’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

“The salmon are a life source that we all depend on. Just as we are united with each other, we are also united with the salmon,” [said](#) Samuel Penney, Nez Perce chairman. “We are all salmon people.”