

**Statement by the Columbia River Treaty Tribes
to the Pacific Fishery Management Council
Seattle, Washington
April 10, 2024**

Good day members of the Council:

My name is Erik Holt. I am a member of the Nez Perce Fish and Wildlife Committee. I am here today with Bruce Jim, Sr. from Warm Springs and Wilbur Slockish, Jr. from Yakama to provide a statement on behalf of the four Columbia River Treaty Tribes; the Umatilla, Warm Springs, Yakama, and Nez Perce Tribes. From time immemorial, salmon have been key to our first foods which also include water, deer, roots, and berries. Our first foods represent the ecosystem that we and the salmon are part of.

Our ecosystem is under great stress which has resulted in the decline of the salmon which we depend on. The rivers used to function correctly and the plants and animals were in balance. The rivers were clean enough for us to drink and the fish were healthy. As development occurred and dams were built, the flows were altered and spawning grounds were destroyed. Historically, gravels and sediments washed downstream and out into the ocean. Dams have blocked these natural processes. Sediments washing out of tributaries now collect around river mouths. These shallow deltas are very difficult for juveniles to pass safely through and can represent obstacles for returning adults. Photos of two important tributary mouths at the Klickitat and Deschutes Rivers are shown at the end of this statement as examples even though there are other important tributaries as well. The water depths at these tributaries can be very shallow as the reservoir levels fluctuate. Sometimes the deltas are only a few feet deep. Sometimes they are completely exposed. This means these areas do not function correctly as cool water refuges for salmon. These areas not only can strand juvenile fish, but they harbor significant numbers of predators. Besides birds which we discussed earlier, these areas have many non-native fish that prey on juveniles. It is important to remember that the human actions that have led to these situations are responsible for high levels of predation on juveniles. Juveniles that are killed because of poor water and habitat management reduce the numbers of fish migrating to the ocean and contributing to fisheries.

These river mouth deltas can also leave salmon and steelhead exposed to increased harvest compared to other areas.

Better conditions around river mouths along with better reservoir management will help keep the river as cool as possible and may help with efforts to reduce growth of aquatic vegetation. We can't continue with status quo management of these areas.

As part of the management of non-native fish, we think regulations should be implemented requiring any non-native fish caught in any fishery be killed immediately and forbidding returning non-native fish to the river. The tribes do not support catch and release derbies for non-native fish.

Our tribes are also developing plans and proposals to help restore these river mouths through predator control, dredging and building up upland areas to support riparian vegetation. By restoring better passage through these river mouth areas, we can both increase survival of juveniles and offer adults better cool water areas to rest on their journeys upstream. We will need support from our co-managers as well as from the Corps of Engineers to do this work but we think it can offer significant benefits to salmon and help the Columbia River become more resilient to the impacts from climate change.

As energy-rich carcasses and eggs decompose, marine-derived nutrients like carbon and nitrogen that accumulate in salmon during their lifetime are taken up in the food web and absorbed by the surrounding vegetation (approximately 99% of the weight of adult salmon and steelhead comes from their time in the ocean eating and maturing to adults). Having fish spawning in rivers with good freshwater habitat is expected to increase primary production, invertebrate biomass, and juvenile salmon biomass and growth. This will improve the capacity of the watersheds to support a broader spectrum of our first foods, the fish, animals and plants. Marine derived nutrients are expected to also benefit at least 100 other species of fish, plants, animals and insects found in the local watersheds of the basin. We want to bring salmon back healthy and harvestable levels to feed the people and the watersheds and all their inhabitants.

Our goal is to take action in our areas to restore productivity to salmon and steelhead for both the sake of the fish and to support appropriate levels of harvest for all people.

We have been reviewing the impacts to Columbia River stocks in the proposed ocean fisheries. The impacts to upper Columbia summer chinook will result in the ability to share the total harvest equally as required under the *U.S. v. Oregon* Management Agreement. Upriver bright impacts in combined non-treaty ocean plus the allowed catch for in-river fisheries appears to be appropriate as expected under *U.S. v. Oregon* harvest sharing. It appears that the BPH stock should have a high enough return to meet its escapement needs after fisheries, but we do remain cautious about depending on the BPH forecast accuracy.

Thank You.



Figure 1. River mouth delta at the mouth of the Klickitat River.



Figure 2. River mouth delta at the mouth of the Deschutes River.