



Tribal Leaders are Calling on Congress and President Biden to Honor the Treaties Made with Northwest Tribes

A bold, comprehensive plan to restore salmon cannot wait

With each election cycle in our tribal governments, one thing has remained constant: Tribal leaders inherit the depletion and near extinction of our salmon runs. The crisis is at a breaking point and we need Congress and President Biden to act immediately to stop not only the extinction of salmon, but the decimation of our way of life as the salmon people. As the late-tribal leader Billy Frank, Jr., said, “We and they are the same.”

There was a time not that long ago when our people could not imagine an end to the salmon runs, when our rivers and streams overflowed with abundance. Our people never knew famine. But with the arrival of settlers came land conversion, dams, water diversions, industrial development, pollution, and global warming. The waters are warming in part because of climate change, but also because of the huge concrete barriers that also block salmon migration. Recent EPA analysis found that four dams of the lower Snake River were warming waters to fish-killing levels.

Salmon are inseparable from who we are. We exist because salmon exist. They are our food, ceremony, our culture and the very heart of our economy and lifeway. Even as our ancestors’ lives and homelands were threatened, they made sure to protect within the treaties our ancestral salmon lifeway. Those treaties were promises made by the United States government. Those promises must be kept.

After years of small steps or neglect by the federal government, salmon runs continue to drop; some species have been pushed to the brink of extinction. When they are gone, our lives and lifeways, our ceremonies, our customs and our cultural economies are at stake.

What we hear from federal leaders is that we need more time. More time, and still more time. How much more time? Enough to permanently eradicate our culture? How much longer do we need to let continue an approach that has unambiguously failed us for over three decades?

In his Letter from Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, “‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’” We cannot and will not let our salmon be pushed into the Never of extinction. That is our sacred obligation.

We need a comprehensive solution to restore salmon to the region and the Columbia basin. We appreciate the conversations that have been organized by the Governors, but the time for talk has long since passed. Congress and the President must act boldly and urgently to remove the lower Snake River dams and put into place permanent solutions to fix this crisis before it passes a point of no return.

Failure to act isn’t just a violation of our treaty rights, it is a threat to our lives as salmon people and a moral failure of the highest order. A solution to this problem can no longer be passed on to the next Congress and the next generation of tribal leaders.

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