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Testimony by

Alaska Governor Tony Knowles
State of Alaska

To the Federal Agency Caucus
On the
Recovery of Snake River and Columbia River Salmon

Juneau, Alaska
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Presented by David Benton

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I want to welcome the federal agencies responsible for restoring the salmon of the Pacific Northwest to Alaska and thank you for holding hearings in four Southeast communities. The decisions you make have profound effects on Alaska's fishing families and all who care about the future of Pacific salmon.

Five years ago I testified in Ketchikan on the Proposed Recovery Plan for Snake River salmon. At that time I expressed concerns about the federal government's use of the Endangered Species Act to restrict Alaska harvest without any measurable gain for Snake River fall chinook. I also expressed concerns about misuse of the Endangered Species Act, as a political and economic weapon, rather than as a critical tool for making sound biological decisions. These concerns remain today.

Since that day five years ago, fisheries have continued to be restricted while salmon in the Columbia River Basin have continued to decline. And now, after further decreases in harvest and a new Abundance-based Management regime put in place by the 1999 Pacific Salmon Treaty Agreements, the federal government is discussing further 50-75% reductions in Southeast Alaska's king salmon fisheries. Indeed some proposals floated by the agencies suggest that Southeast chinook fisheries be closed altogether.

Further fishing reductions in Alaska are not a viable, science-based option. Such reductions would not recover the Snake River fall chinook, and would do absolutely nothing to assist with recovery of the spring/summer chinook. They would, however, strike a deathblow to many Alaskan fishing families and coastal communities.

Also, over the last five years we have been engaged in very controversial negotiations under the Pacific Salmon Treaty to develop the means to protect and restore these stocks. These new agreements included provisions to restore salmon habitat and assure safe passage of salmon to spawning areas. These groundbreaking provisions of the Treaty were agreed to by the United States and Canada precisely because of a recognition that fisheries restrictions alone cannot recover these fish.

It is no surprise many Columbia and Snake River salmon populations are in trouble, and that some are listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. The sad truth is that National Marine Fisheries Service now believes Snake River chinook salmon migrating to the sea are safer in a barge or in trucks on the highway than they are in a river that has been transformed from a natural watershed into an industrial machine. If there is commitment to restore salmon in the rivers, the only presented scientific option is to restore the rivers of the Northwest to a natural condition. This is the only way to assure recovery of these stocks, and it is the only option that satisfies the requirements of the new Pacific Salmon Treaty agreements on habitat and safe passage.

This is no small challenge for the Nation and Northwest, as the Columbia and Snake Rivers have become a virtual "killing field" for salmon.

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) allows the federal dams on the Columbia and Snake Rivers to kill 62-99 percent of the juvenile Snake River fall chinook and nearly 40 percent of the adults.

Oregon biologists estimated the dams are responsible for up to 93 percent of total mortality on Snake River fall chinook.

Alaska biologists note 70 percent of the river miles between the ocean and the spawning grounds for these fish have been converted to reservoirs.

Fishing is not the problem and fishing restrictions cannot solve the problem. Our biologists estimate that for each 8,000 chinook that are given up by Alaska, about one additional Snake River fall chinook will make it to the spawning grounds. Even if the draconian cuts of 50-75% were imposed in all sport and commercial fisheries in Southeast Alaska, there would not be enough additional fall chinook reaching the Snake River spawning grounds to make an appreciable contribution to the recovery of that stock.

For example, in 1997, even if Alaska's incidental take of Snake River fall chinook had been cut in half, it would have only added about 20 more spawners to the roughly 800 that returned to spawn. Such a cut would have reduced Southeast Alaska's chinook catch by about 160,000, which in some years could mean no fishery at all. These are rough numbers but they give you an idea of the order of magnitude involved.

Although fishing is not the problem, fishermen have already paid a high price through harvest reductions over the years. Alaska Department of Fish and Game studies show that between 1988 and 1997 before the new treaty took effect, harvest-caused mortality on Snake River fall chinook had decreased significantly, from about 74% to 22% of the adult mortality. This

decrease included Alaska, Canada, Washington, and Oregon coastal fisheries, and the Yakama, Nez Perce, Umatilla, and Warm Springs tribal fisheries in the Columbia River. During the last decade Alaska trollers income from chinook harvest has dropped over 75%.

Clearly fisheries are doing their part. Significantly, following the signing of the 1999 Salmon Treaty Agreements the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) signed a biological opinion that the northern fisheries arrangements in the Pacific Salmon Treaty agreement satisfy the Endangered Species Act as it applies to harvest of Pacific salmon. In essence, last December NMFS determined that recovery of Pacific salmon could no longer rest on the backs of the fishermen.

The discussions, and the decisions, about how to restore salmon runs in the Columbia River basin, have now evolved into an argument over conflicting directions. Some argue in favor of breaching the four lower Snake River dams to help restore natural river conditions. Others propose techno-fixes such as mechanical dam bypass machinery, fish-friendly hydroelectric turbines, and increased trucking and barging of migrating juvenile salmon.

Scientists in the Pacific Northwest increasingly point to the four lower Snake River dams as a critical part of the problem, and the only lasting solution. The Oregon Chapter of the American Fisheries Society, the number one professional fisheries management organization in the area, states:

"If society-at-large wishes to restore these salmonids to sustainable, fishable levels, a significant portion of the lower Snake River must be returned to a free-flowing condition by breaching the four lower Snake River dams."

Our own Alaska Department of Fish and Game biologists confirm that assessment is sound, as do biologists from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Over 500 Alaska commercial fishermen and several Alaska sport and commercial fishing organizations have already joined the American Fisheries Society in support of bypassing the four lower Snake River dams.

If breaching the dams is unacceptable, then other viable, scientifically sound options must be identified and implemented immediately. It is not acceptable to further reduce Alaska's harvest and put the burden on Alaska's fishing families. Doing so would be purely cosmetic, punitive to Alaska's fishermen, and avoid an effective resolution.

The federal agencies must now meet the challenge of providing Safe Passage for salmon to and from their spawning grounds and a healthy ecosystem for fish to thrive. I believe it is time for the federal agencies to embrace the common goal of long-term recovery. It is time to put aside the convenience of appearing to do something through additional harvest reductions, which only fail in the long run.

In closing, I simply want to express my appreciation of all of the fishermen here tonight, and to their families, and to Alaska's biologists and fisheries

managers. Together you have set the standard for excellence in salmon conservation. Thank you.