

Rebecca A. Miles
Chairman
Nez Perce Tribal Executive Committee

Testimony
Before the Committee on Resources
Water and Power Subcommittee
United States House of Representatives

Hearing on "Keeping the Columbia/Snake a Working River System"
June 6, 2005

Ta'c meeywei. Good morning. My name is Rebecca Miles. I am Chairman of the Nez Perce Tribe.

The Nez Perce Tribe welcomes you to our homelands and our rivers. We, the Nimiiipuu, have lived and fished here since time immemorial. We have always lived here, and we have always been connected with this place and all of its creatures.

Our leaders have always been strong, courageous, and determined to leave this world a better place. We speak from our hearts and minds to honor those that have come before us, and to preserve our culture and our way of life for our children's children.

This month marks the 150th anniversary of our 1855 Treaty with the United States government. Our treaty reflects our status as a sovereign. Our treaty reserves to our people the rights they have always exercised: the right to take fish at all our usual and accustomed places, and to hunt, gather, and pasture on open and unclaimed lands. Our treaty, the U.S. Constitution acknowledges, is "the supreme law of the land." Our treaty imposes trust obligations on the United States. And, our treaty is a contract with the citizens of this Nation. "Great nations, like great men, keep their word."

As our ancestors demanded, we ask you that you speak straight to us. We request that you honor this Nation's treaty and trust obligations. And, as elected officials, we ask that you fulfill your duties by carefully considering all points of view.

The Nez Perce Tribe appreciates this opportunity to testify before you at this hearing, even though we were invited only at the very last minute. In 1855, at the treaty council, Chief Lookingglass was nearly excluded because he and others were returning from buffalo country. His presence, and his words, made a difference in securing our treaty rights. We hope that our words today at this hearing on "Keeping the Columbia / Snake A Working River System" will make a difference in restoring the salmon runs of the Snake and Columbia rivers, and in restoring our communities.

I want to make three points.

First, the Snake River is not "A Working River" for salmon. This is not just the view of the Nez Perce Tribe, its fishermen, or its biologists. This is the view of the best available science. The Biological Review Team, convened by NOAA Fisheries, recently concluded that all of the Snake River salmon runs are in dire status. Specifically, they found that the status of the species already listed as "threatened" – Snake River spring/summer Chinook, Snake River fall chinook, and Snake river steelhead – are headed downward and are likely to be listed as "endangered" "within the foreseeable future." Snake River sockeye are, of course, already endangered. Salmon cannot withstand the status quo. We must face this reality, and acknowledge that this is occurring on our watch.

Second, we all share responsibility for ensuring that salmon and our local communities are sustainable for the long term. The future of this region and our homeland must be founded on our natural resources and our geography. The economic benefits of healthy, harvestable salmon runs are enormous. Again, this is not just the Nez Perce Tribe's view. It is the view of independent experts.

The report titled, "The Economic Impact of the 2001 Salmon Season In Idaho," found that that the economic benefit of the salmon season was nearly \$90 million dollars. Just this year, the report titled "The Potential Economic Impact of Restored Salmon and Steelhead Fishing in Idaho" concluded that restored salmon and steelhead fisheries could produce \$544 million dollars a year in economic activity in Idaho. The Clearwater and Salmon Basins would be the biggest beneficiaries, to the tune of \$331 million dollars.

Our economy in this region is diversifying. In fact, the Nez Perce Tribe is the second largest employer in this area. Geographically, Lewiston and Clarkston will always be a center for getting goods to market: rail and truck transport

provide viable and reliable alternatives to the heavily-subsidized barge system. Again, this is not just the Nez Perce Tribe's view; it is shared by those who have carefully studied this.

We, as Indian people, have withstood a number of transitions. We look forward to working with our neighbors in making the transition to a river that works for salmon and for our local communities.

Third, all options for salmon and our local communities must be on the table. The Nez Perce Tribe is doing everything it can to rebuild salmon to healthy, harvestable levels. We have received national awards for our habitat rehabilitation work in collaboration with the U.S. Forest Service. We operate the Nez Perce Tribal Hatchery, a facility that uses state-of-the-art techniques to mimic nature and that is designed to assist in rebuilding the natural runs. And, consistent with our tradition of conservation, which we have practiced since time immemorial, we have voluntarily restricted our harvests for decades.

Yet, these actions alone are not enough. The federal Columbia/Snake River dams do the most harm to salmon, and these dams need to make the largest contribution to rebuilding the runs. Judge Redden's recent ruling comes as no surprise. It is simply a reminder that the law does not allow the impacts of the Columbia/Snake River dams and the imperiled status of the fish to be ignored by the federal government.

We need to consider the best scientific and economic options, not just the most politically expedient ones. The Nez Perce Tribe continues to support breaching the four lower Snake River dams and investing in the local communities affected by that decision. Again, this is not just the Nez Perce Tribe's position; the best science and the best economics support breaching these dams.

The Nez Perce Tribe is committed to working with our neighbors in making this transition and protecting our Northwest way of life.

In closing, the only way that we will all win is to ensure that the Columbia and Snake rivers work for salmon and our communities. We trust that you will take our words to heart. Thank you. Qe'ciyew'yew.