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**Testimony of  
Liz Hamilton  
Executive Director  
Northwest Sportfishing Industry Association**

**Before the  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on Resources  
Subcommittee on Water and Power**

**June 6, 2005**

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Liz Hamilton, and I am executive director of the Northwest Sportfishing Industry Association (NSIA). NSIA is a group of over 300 fishing businesses with representatives throughout the region. My members include both larger businesses such as G.I. Joes and Fred Meyer, as well as smaller, family-owned businesses. In addition most of the larger sportfishing clubs are members of NSIA, as are many individuals who share our goals and vision. (Membership listing attached) But in all cases, NSIA members participate in a multi-billion dollar industry in the Northwest and we are acutely aware that the future health of salmon and steelhead and our businesses is tied to the management of the Columbia and Snake rivers and the federal hydrosystem.

I submit the following testimony in order to share with you the importance of restoring healthy salmon and steelhead populations in the Snake and Columbia rivers to the members of the NSIA, the Northwest economy in general, and the quality of life in this part of the country.

The Snake and Columbia are working rivers, but need to work a lot better. Northwesterners rightfully depend on the Columbia and Snake for fishing, irrigation, power, recreation, and navigation. Unfortunately, the fish, recreation, and associated jobs provided by these rivers are downplayed and undervalued. Instead the focus is often on maximizing energy revenue at the expense of salmon – even when the economic benefits associated with healthy salmon populations are too big to ignore. I urge subcommittee members to keep in mind that to the 36,000 family wage jobs in Northwest sportfishing, working Northwest rivers must have healthy, fishable populations of salmon and steelhead. That is why the Northwest Sportfishing Industry Association is part of a broad coalition of sport fishing, commercial fishing, and conservation organizations working to improve conditions for salmon in the mainstem Snake and Columbia rivers. We do this work because we must to survive.

**Dedicated to the preservation, restoration and enhancement of sport fisheries and the businesses dependent upon them. Call toll free 866-315-NSIA.**

When I say that salmon are part of working river, I mean that in terms of jobs. Looking at Idaho in particular, a 2005 study by Ben Johnson Associates (submitted along with this testimony) found that restoring Snake River salmon and steelhead just to the levels seen during the 1950s (still less than 10% of historic populations for Snake River spring/summer chinook) would generate \$544 million annually for the state, \$330 million of which would go directly to rural river-based communities – that’s about 270 percent better than was generated during 2001, when Idaho had a salmon fishing season for the first time in years. That year, Snake River spring/chinook season brought the town of Riggins, Idaho nearly one quarter of its annual income from 2001. To Riggins, the term “working river” conjures up images of abundant salmon runs and an economic boost.

The businesses of NSIA are convinced that the Idaho numbers would pale compared to Oregon and Washington economics if a similar study were conducted for those portions of the Columbia. Restoring Columbia and Snake to the levels examined by the Idaho study would allow the region-wide economic benefits of recreational salmon and steelhead fishing to double.

NSIA approaches Endangered Species Act protections for Snake and Columbia salmon and steelhead from the perspective that salmon mean business, and if we want the fishing business to grow, we need to improve salmon habitat so that more fish return. If we want to make these rivers work for fishermen and fishing businesses, we need to do more, not less, to make sure that negative impacts of federal and non-federal dams throughout the Columbia Basin are reduced. That’s why 1,100 businesses, tied to sportfishing, recently signed a letter (submitted with this testimony) in support of H.R. 1615, the Salmon Planning Act, a bill that would ask the federal government to fully consider how best to remove the lower Snake River dams and replace their benefits.

There is no question that the ESA is a good thing for salmon and salmon fishing businesses. To reap the full benefits of this law, it needs to be implemented and enforced, not ignored. We need a federal salmon plan that results in the recovery and delisting of salmon, not just a plan that lets these fish limp along the edge of extinction. The longer that they hover near the edge, the more likely it is they’ll fall into extinction.

It is preposterous to use our failure to adequately recover salmon and steelhead to date as a reason to weaken the law itself. This is the wrong reaction to our nation’s failure to nurture this law live up to its promise. Instead, we must admit that our salmon – and our salmon economy – are in danger. Ignoring the problem would be like refusing to go to the emergency room after having a heart attack because you don’t want to face the fact that you either need to change how you live or die.

Because our businesses depend on restoring healthy salmon populations, NSIA has long advocated for a stronger federal salmon plan. That’s why we were forced to join the plaintiffs that two weeks ago convinced a federal court to invalidate the 2004 salmon plan, also known as the BiOp.

Everyone who cares about maximizing the potential of the Columbia and Snake rivers for the economic well-being of the Pacific Northwest – including the inland Northwest – is joyous that Judge Redden struck down the administration’s convoluted disingenuous salmon plan. While there has never been a biological opinion in place on the Columbia and Snake that would, if

implemented, have restored Columbia Basin salmon and steelhead to self-sustaining, harvestable levels, the 2004 federal salmon plan was a step backward to the plans of the early nineties that “cried out for a major overhaul.”

The plan would have allowed federal dam managers to leave unaddressed 96 to 100 percent of the mortality that the federal hydrosystem imposes on juvenile Snake River salmon and steelhead as they migrate toward the ocean. In other words, the best we could hope for from the plan is that 10 years and \$6 billion from now, Snake River fish hardly be better off during their migration than they are now. The hydrosystem would still be allowed to kill between 49 and 86 percent of the Snake River salmon and steelhead migrating downstream.

Legal questions aside, our fears about the scientific inadequacy of the 2004 Salmon Plan’s approach were recently confirmed through an independent scientific review conducted by the American Fisheries Society at the request of the Northwest native tribes. Among other things, that review concluded that the Salmon Plan’s failure to address the impact of the dams and reliance on things like trucking and barging fish downstream instead is quite simply scientifically inadequate to put salmon on track for recovery.

It would be hard to argue that it’s in the best interest of Northwesterners to leave the hydrosystem off the hook for the salmon declines it causes. We’ve tried that strategy for decades, and it leads not only to salmon declines and extinction, but to litigation, nasty political fights, and stagnant economies in rural Northwest communities from the mountains of central Idaho to the Oregon and Washington coasts. And those communities, including my businesses, have already made sacrifices to recover salmon, but the dams simply exact too large a toll to leave them off the hook any longer.

It’s time for an alternative to this sluggish status quo, and even more than in the late 1990s it’s clear that the centerpiece of such an alternative should be removing the four lower Snake River dams and investing in fully replacing their benefits. This can be accomplished for approximately the same taxpayer and electric ratepayer investment as is required by the existing salmon plan, and still leave sufficient funding for habitat restoration in the Columbia River and its non-Snake River tributaries. Some in this crowd may believe otherwise, but I guarantee you that no serious salmon advocates – I repeat, *none* – are talking about removing the higher value dams along the Columbia – just the four obsolete dams on the lower Snake River.

Federal agencies themselves have concluded that removing the lower Snake dams is the most scientifically certain way to recover Snake River salmon. This conclusion has since been buttressed by others, including the aforementioned American Fisheries Society, which determined in their independent Salmon Plan review that Snake River salmon survival and recovery would “be assured” with lower Snake River dam removal.

On the other side of this equation is the status quo, which is guaranteed to present no new economic opportunities for fishing businesses or anyone else. Instead, we’ll keep fighting over a diminishing resource until the potential for restoring it is eventually gone. I prefer my vision of the future, which allows for salmon recovery, over \$3 billion per year in new fishing and recreational opportunities, *and* protection for existing businesses like irrigators and grain shippers.

But we're not yet to the point where the federal agencies in charge of salmon recovery, share this vision, despite all the evidence. Which leads me to this summer and our modest request for help in turning things around for salmon migrants and our future.

This proposal is important to keep these rivers working for fishermen, even at low current levels. Absent the improved flow and dam operations we are requesting, fewer Snake River fall chinook are likely to return in three to five years. These steps are particularly important in light of what would otherwise be poor river conditions this summer and the fact that ocean conditions may be taking a turn for the worse.

No one doubts that ocean conditions play a large role in the fate of salmon populations--they have for thousands of years. In the past, our rivers have been in good enough shape to ensure the survival of salmon runs during bad ocean conditions. Now we fear that the Snake River outmigrants cannot endure another of the ocean's endless cycles.

Our river proposal request merely asks that salmon migrating through the Snake and Columbia rivers this summer are given the semblance of a fair shake during this low water year. Scientists tell us this modest proposal will likely double the survival rates of juvenile Snake River fall chinook, and flow targets and water temperatures will still be well below what biologists (and our laws in the case of water temperatures) say we should be shooting for if we are to recover the salmon and steelhead of the Columbia and Snake.

Unfortunately, what's been typical of salmon migration conditions under the river management decisions that have been made since 2001 is that salmon and salmon dependent businesses are repeatedly sacrificed for the sake of maintaining status quo river operations. We are asking for Northwest electric ratepayers, shippers, and irrigators to make minor changes during this low water year in order to more equitably distribute the burden among all the groups that share in the benefits of these great rivers.

The science strongly suggests that improving river conditions and decreasing reliance on juvenile fish transportation would help improve Snake River fall chinook survival, and a strategy that "spreads the risk" between transported and non-transported fish is warranted.<sup>1</sup> While ocean conditions were largely responsible for the rebound in salmon runs earlier this decade, another contributor was the fact that in the late nineties, the Bureau of Reclamation actually delivered the amount of Idaho water that has been promised since the 1995 BiOp. Since 2001, the percentage of juvenile Snake River salmon migrating through an unhealthy, hot, slowly flowing river has increased considerably, and that is likely one cause of this year's poor spring chinook returns.

And this years' fish returns are not just a little bit lower, they're much lower. Revised projections have made it appear that Snake River spring/summer chinook will return at their lowest levels since the bad old days of the mid-1990s, with returns as low as they were when these fish were first listed under the ESA in 1992.

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<sup>1</sup> See, "Effects of Federal Columbia River Power System on Salmonid Populations," NOAA Technical Memorandum NFMS-NWFSC-63, February 2005, p. xvi. Available at [http://www.nwfsc.noaa.gov/assets/25/6061\\_04142005\\_152601\\_effectstechmemo63final.pdf](http://www.nwfsc.noaa.gov/assets/25/6061_04142005_152601_effectstechmemo63final.pdf)

The impact of these changes for other river users is real, but equitable given decreasing fish numbers, a less favorable ocean, and current river conditions. Northwest electric ratepayers would likely pay an additional 11 to 54 cents per month on their residential power bills next year – I haven't met anyone who would not be willing to pay a little more on their electric bills if it meant having a better chance to recover these legendary fish and give their families more chances to fish for them.

Idaho irrigators would still be providing less than the 427,000 acre feet of water they promised under the recently ratified Snake River Water Rights agreement with the Nez Perce, the State of Idaho, and the Bureau of Reclamation, so impacts to upper Snake River water users would be less than they would normally anticipate if the agreement were enforced.

For about 2 months shippers shipping from the Port of Lewiston may need to ship either by barge about 30 miles downstream from Lewiston or move their goods by rail or truck, as the Potlatch Corp. has already been doing.

These are not insignificant sacrifices, but they are not out of proportion to those that will be made this year, and have been made for years, by communities that depend on salmon and steelhead fishing for their income and well-being. Due to decreasing spring chinook since 2001 and their precipitous declines over the last two years, our industry is in the process of layoffs.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. It is NSIA's conclusion that our Nation, our salmon and our jobs need the Endangered Species Act. The Act is right for the fish and right for our businesses – it just needs to be applied honestly and fairly by the federal agencies to ensure that the federal hydrosystem allows the Snake and Columbia rivers to work for a variety of interests, not just a few.