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Seattle Aquarium • Sierra Club • Toxic-Free Future •
Washington Environmental Council •
Whale and Dolphin Conservation •
Whale Scout • Wild Orca

February 19, 2019

Department of Ecology
Water Quality Program
Eleanor Ott, PE
Post Office Box 47600
Olympia, Washington 98504

RE: Protect Orcas & Salmon with Clean Water Act § 401 Authority

Dear Ms. Ott,

The Orca Salmon Alliance (OSA) writes on behalf of our seventeen organizations and millions of members, thousands of whom live in Washington State. We ask you to exercise Washington's authority under § 401 of the Clean Water Act to help ensure the Columbia Basin's federal dam operators address not only oil pollution caused by the federal dams, but also rising water temperatures. This will help protect salmon and the diverse web of communities and species that depend on salmon—including the starving Southern Resident orcas.

Washington State should exercise its § 401 authority to ensure that the Columbia Basin dams provide cool water, adequate spill, and conditions necessary for upstream and downstream salmon migration. Doing so is consistent with Washington State's leadership to save Southern Resident orcas as well as to address climate change.

We have a temperature crisis on the Columbia and Snake rivers. The nine federal dams on these rivers alter the natural temperature regimes, making the rivers run slower and hotter. Scientists estimate that average Columbia and Snake River water temperatures in early fall are increased by an average of 6.3°F as a result of impoundment. Warmer water holds less oxygen, and salmonids require water with a lot of dissolved oxygen, typical of fast-flowing, cold rivers and streams. At very low oxygen concentrations salmon can suffer from reduced critical functions and may have less energy available for spawning, as well as for resistance to disease, escape from predators, and recovery from stress.

Both Washington and Oregon have set a water quality standard (WQS) of 68°F as the 1-day maximum temperature. However, this water quality standard has never been enforced at federal dams. Meanwhile, average water temperature has been increasing steadily in the

Columbia and Snake rivers for decades. These days, temperatures regularly exceed 68°F during the summer and fall due to impoundment, causing salmon to struggle to complete their upstream migration.

Virtually all climate models predict consistently warming air temperatures in the Pacific Northwest, and the most recent report from the U.S. Global Change Research Program, the Fourth National Climate Assessment, projects salmon could lose 22% of their habitat in Washington State due to warming stream waters. Ameliorating the temperature impacts of dams on the Columbia and Snake rivers is critical to mitigating the effects of climate change on salmon.

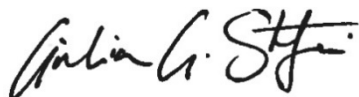
The future of the Southern Resident orcas is intimately linked to that of Columbia Basin salmon. The Southern Residents depend on Columbia Basin spring Chinook at this very time of year (January – April). These fish sustain them through the winter months and feed nursing orca mothers and their calves during a particularly critical time in their life-cycle.

Congress enacted § 401 to allow states to protect their waterways from the impacts of federally permitted activities, like dams, that discharge into state waters. We understand that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recently withdrew the draft National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permits for the dams. We hope that Washington will stand strong and fight on behalf of salmon, orcas, and all Washingtonians to protect the state's right to require that federal dam operators protect Washington's rivers from oil and temperature pollution.

The Southern Resident orcas and Columbia Basin salmon can't wait. Washington should use its authority under the Clean Water Act to do what the Trump administration and federal agencies cannot or will not—protect orca and restore salmon.

Thank you for your consideration of our concerns, and your leadership on behalf of the Southern Resident orcas, and communities of Washington State. Please contact Giulia Good Stefani, Senior Attorney, Natural Resources Defense Council at (310) 598-8318 or ggoodstefani@nrdc.org for additional information.

Sincerely,



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