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COLUMBIA RIVER INTER TRIBAL FISH COMMISSION
TESTIMONY TO THE HOUSE NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE
OVERSIGHT HEARING "EXAMINING THE HISTORY OF FEDERAL LANDS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRIBAL CO-MANAGEMENT"
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Good morning, Chairman Grijalva and members of the Committee. My name is Aja DeCoteau. I am the executive director of the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, the fisheries technical and coordinating agency for the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon, and the Nez Perce Tribe.

Recognizing that this hearing's primary focus is tribal co-management of federal lands outside of reservation boundaries, we would like to describe how the treaty tribes became an integral part and partner of Columbia Basin fisheries co-management role across the Columbia Basin and into the ocean where many of our aquatic resources migrate. Much of our experience over the last 50 years is a blueprint for creating tribal management roles with a variety of different landscapes, species, and areas of cultural significance.

Tribal Tradition of Land Management
Since time immemorial, the Columbia River tribes have developed ways of life, teachings, and cultures that are intertwined with their homeland — particularly the fish that return to their rivers and streams. All four tribes have unique cultural practices, dialects, homelands, and histories, but they share a common vision of the significance of salmon.

We have a deep and reverent cultural connection to our homelands and traditions. The knowledge of sustainable and appropriate management and care for these lands has been passed down from parents to children since time immemorial. The fact we are still here today is testament to the value of generations of observations, adaptations, and traditional knowledge of *tamanwit*, our concept of the natural law that governs the balance of life on earth.

Our cultures represent thousands of years of observation and learning, intimately connecting us to the unique ecosystems of our homelands and making us experts in these systems. This understanding guides us in our yearly rounds to hunt, fish, and gather our traditional foods, which we call our "First Foods."

In bestowing the First Foods, the Creator directed that we have an obligation to speak for and act on the behalf of them. The water, the fish, the deer, the roots and berries can't testify before you here today, but we, as the first people of this landscape are obligated and honored to speak for them.

We are taught that we don't own these resources. We understand from the earliest age that we are only caretakers of this land and its resources for our future generations. We have an obligation to our children, grandchildren, and the generations that follow to do everything we can for these resources today. Our natural resources are our cultural resources. They define who we are as a people. Destruction of these resources or denying us access to these resources is essentially a form of cultural genocide.

There is a deep connection between where the tribes live and who we are. These are themes heard frequently when tribal elders speak about watershed restoration and bringing the salmon back to the Columbia Rivers and its tributaries. To our people, salmon restoration is not just based on economics, politics, and science—it's also about cultural values, spiritual practices, and ultimately about what it means to be human.

The charge of tribal elders and leadership consistently remains the same: We must ensure that our future generations can live as Indian people on this landscape in the manner that the Creator intended us to live. That means we must not only be able to determine our own futures, but also have access to the healthy, functioning ecosystem upon which our cultures are based. This includes abundant clean, cool water; salmon to meet our ceremonial, subsistence, and economic needs; deer; roots and berries; and all the other animals, birds, fish, and plants that fill out our traditional diet.

Restoration Efforts and Management Actions Guided by Connection to the Land

For millennia, our tribes managed the natural abundance of this land, including its legendary fisheries. Pre-contact, the famed Columbia River salmon runs were estimated to number between 15 and 20 million chinook, sockeye, and coho salmon and steelhead. Tribal harvests between 6 and 11 million fish sustainably supported all our ceremonial, subsistence, and economic needs, while leaving plenty to enrich the ecosystem and replenish that abundance.

Since 1855 when our treaties with the United States were signed, the Columbia Basin has been dramatically altered. Increased human population, dam construction, unregulated harvest, and substantial habitat modifications drastically reduced salmon populations. By the 1970s, the once-bountiful salmon runs had dwindled to less than a million fish returning each year and the specter of extinction hovered over multiple runs in the basin. While the US environmental laws helped stop the wholesale development of the Columbia Basin hydropower potential, we still faced a continued decline in the habitat and survival of our salmon resource.

In 1977, the Yakama, Umatilla, Warm Springs, and Nez Perce tribes united forces, creating the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (CRITFC) in an effort to protect and restore salmon and their treaty rights to fish for them. CRITFC began receiving fisheries management funds from the US Bureau of Indian Affairs through PL 99-638 contracts. These funds addressed a variety of needs including our participation in the *US v Oregon* harvest management discussion, an ability to begin the technical review and understanding of the watersheds that hold our treaty trust resource, a voice at the hydrosystem management table, and the genesis of hatchery production capability.

Admittedly our early efforts were limited, and our workforce only numbered a few dozen across the four tribes and CRITFC. But this early funding was provided yearly with autonomy to use as we saw fit in creating our modern-day salmon management presence.

By 1980, the four tribes had successfully obtained amendments to the regional power act to add fish and wildlife mitigation to the Federal Columbia River Power System (FCRPS) operations, which was initially focused solely on hydropower production. The treaty tribes with their developing technical expertise, which was informed by our culture, values, and worldview, began successfully developing programs and projects which were funded as mitigation for the inundation and operational fish losses associated with the FCRSP.

By the 1990s, many salmon runs in the Columbia Basin were still on the path to extinction. The National Atmospheric and Oceans Administration listed 14 Columbia River salmon stocks under the Endangered Species Act. While the states varied in their response to these listings, NOAA began developing Endangered Species Act (ESA) required recovery plans. Based on early experience they sought out the assistance of the treaty tribes who worked in close partnership with local city and county governments to develop technically sound and socially vetted actions to recovery ESA-listed salmonids.

In 1995, the tribes released Wy-Kan-Ush-Mi Wa-Kish-Wit, the "Spirit of the Salmon" restoration plan. This plan takes a holistic approach to salmon restoration in the Columbia Basin, with its goal to "put fish back in the rivers and restore the watersheds where fish live." The approach is holistic in several ways: First, it emphasizes the importance of the entire watershed to well-functioning rivers and streams. Second, it combines multiple scientific fields — including fish biology, ecology, and genetics — with traditional Native American knowledge, understanding, and respect for the natural world. And third, it factors in healthy human communities as part of healthy landscapes.

The tribes implement this plan throughout the 42.6 million acres that make up our reservations and ceded lands. This area is over a quarter of the entire Columbia Basin and constitutes 84% of the salmon-accessible rivers and streams above Bonneville Dam. CRITFC and its four member tribes employ over 700 people working on fisheries management, habitat restoration, and research and monitoring activities in the Columbia Basin. We perform a majority of the "on-the-ground" projects funded by the Bonneville Power Administration's Fish and Wildlife Program. Our efforts have resulted in many successes across the basin.

Our habitat restoration projects are designed to protect, enhance, and restore functional floodplain, channel, and watershed processes to provide sustainable and healthy habitat for anadromous fish. Over the last decade, our member tribes implemented projects that resulted in more than 5,000 miles of improved stream flow, 400 miles of improved stream complexity, reconnected over 2,000 acres of floodplain, and improved 15,000 acres of riparian vegetation. These projects have often been done in partnership with landowners and ranchers, local and state governments, and a number of federal agencies.

The work we conduct in the region is well-designed and respected. Last month, the Northwest Power and Conservation Council reviewed over 120 Anadromous Habitat and Hatchery Projects

conducted in the region. Of the fourteen that were rated as "exemplary," seven were projects conducted by scientists at CRITFC and our members tribes. Since 2010, CRITFC scientists have published 127 peer-reviewed manuscripts and given over 436 presentations at professional meetings and symposia. The tribes don't just talk about salmon restoration, they are leading the way in innovative, successful programs that benefit all of people in the Northwest. For example, the Snake River fall chinook went from only 78 wild fish returning in 1990 to more than 60,000 due the efforts of the Nez Perce Tribe's Fisheries program.

Working as Co-managers and Partners

Healthy, well managed lands in the Columbia Basin benefit everyone—not just salmon, but other fish and wildlife and human populations. On the principle of planning for future generations, tribal land managers seek to create sustainable economic returns within healthy watersheds. While the tribes were forced to give up ownership of the ceded lands, they retain permanent rights to hunting, fishing, and gathering in all the areas outside the reservations but within their traditional territories. They have a strong interest to help other landowners—whether they are private individuals or federal or state agencies—to maintain the health and productivity of the ceded lands. Ceding legal title to our territories didn't cede our deep love for and obligation to protect it.

Sharing the management of public lands with tribal nations is an aspect of the federal government's trust responsibility to American Indians; it is also wise stewardship to share the management of these lands and resources with those who have the greatest breadth of knowledge of and commitment to these areas. In many instances, it has been the tribes who have not only the greatest interest in the protection and restoration of these lands, but also the greatest technical understanding of the needed actions.

Historically tribes have not had the resources or capacity to fully participate in policy development and access to forums where natural resources management occurs. Reservation impoverishment meant that day-to-day survival took precedence over expending resources into the technical and policy realm of resource management, especially on off-reservation lands. Much of our success was made possible by early federal funding of tribal capacity. This created the ability for the treaty tribes to be at the table and many times created the forum from which these recovery plans sprung.

Acknowledging this, US policy towards restoring tribal self-determination can be supported with annual funding which has a broad scope of work geared toward natural resource management and that is non-competitive and recurring. Tribes, given their own unique history, culture, and positioning on the political landscape will use these resources to establish their own particular co-management presence in those forums most significant to them. In return, the Federal Government gains the benefit of the wise stewardship from those with the knowledge, commitment, and cultural connection to these areas.

We would propose that the greatest tool available to allow Indian tribes to engage in the management of public lands and natural resources is to provide and maintain funding streams that enable them to bring their long-held ecological knowledge and contemporary science capacities to the management and policy tables for the shared benefit of tribal and non-tribal

publics alike. The funding should have wide sideboards to address the diverse challenges we face and have predictable, manageable reporting requirements co-developed by the tribes. The funding should be recurring basis and without competition.

A Federal commitment to support tribes and partner in public lands co-management over their areas will help secure and safeguard our natural resources for the continuity of tribal culture, as well as provide direct and indirect benefits for all Americans. Working together as partners, the Federal Government and tribes can co-manage the lands and resources over which we both have a shared obligation and duty to protect and preserve for today as well as for future generations.