



SalmonState



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Testimony of Jill Weitz on H.R. 6491, the Salmon Focused Investments in Sustainable Habitats Act and H.R. 6651, the Alaska Salmon Research Task Force Act, before the House Committee on Natural Resources' Subcommittee on Water Oceans, and Wildlife.

Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member Bentz, and Subcommittee Members:

Thank you for the invitation to testify in support of H.R. 6491, the *Salmon FISH Act*, and H.R. 6651, the *Alaska Salmon Research Task Force Act*. My name is Jill Weitz, and I join you today on behalf of SalmonState and as the Director of its Salmon Beyond Borders campaign in Juneau, Alaska—the ancestral and present homelands of the T'aak̄u Kwáan and A'akw Kwáan Tlingit peoples.

Alaska is our nation's last best place for wild salmon. At SalmonState, we work to protect and sustain this iconic species, a fish that spends half their life in freshwater and half in the ocean, miraculously delivering marine derived nutrients hundreds of miles inland to the natal streams where adult salmon spawn and then die. Our mission is to ensure that Alaska remains home of the world's largest, healthiest and most abundant wild salmon resource, which provides culture, food, income, employment and recreation to Alaskans, Americans, and the rest of the world. Salmon Beyond Borders is a community-driven campaign that works to defend and sustain transboundary salmon watersheds of Southeast Alaska and Northwest British Columbia, Canada.

The FISH Act and the *Alaska Salmon Research Task Force Act* create investment opportunities for the identification, restoration, and protection of North America's most outstanding salmon watersheds, as well as collaborative research that includes the application of traditional ecological knowledge of salmon populations and their ecosystems. Where the U.S. has spent billions of dollars to restore salmon habitat throughout the "lower 48", we still have a chance to get it right in Alaska. Salmon conservation starts with protecting watersheds; investing in ecosystem-scale conservation is the best way for us to ensure we have salmon in the future—and Alaska is the biggest salmon stronghold we have left.

For those who might not be connected to or familiar with a “salmon way of life”—or even those living in the more populated centers of the Pacific coast, at the southern extent of the range of Pacific salmon, it might be hard to imagine the importance and immensity of the relatively untouched Bristol Bay watershed in Southwest Alaska or the transboundary watersheds that originate in the glaciated boreal forests of Northwest British Columbia and spill out into the temperate rainforest of Southeast Alaska and the Tongass National Forest.

Covering nearly 28,000 square miles—bigger than Ireland—the transboundary Taku, Stikine, and Unuk Rivers have served as centers for culture, commerce, and biodiversity since time immemorial and now represent some of the last remaining watersheds in North America that can truly act as “salmon strongholds.” All five species of salmon are present in these systems, historically producing 80% of wild Chinook populations throughout the panhandle, many of the salmon populations in these rivers remain abundant, productive, and diverse; however, British Columbia (B.C.) is poised to industrialize immense portions of these watersheds; almost 20% of these watersheds are covered with B.C. mines or mining claims. That’s 3,794,072 acres, or almost 6,000 square miles, of claims across the Taku, Stikine, and Unuk watersheds. There are threats facing these rivers and their salmon populations, but I’d like to focus on *why* we must protect that which has not yet been broken.

At 6,725 square miles—larger than the state of Connecticut—the Taku River watershed represents one of the largest roadless watersheds in North America. In 2021, even after fishery harvest was complete, over 150,000 sockeye salmon and over 75,000 coho salmon returned to spawn in the Taku. The smaller tributaries feeding the main river represent incredible habitat diversity, ranging from wetland-dominated areas fed by copious coastal rain to rivers fed by some of the largest remaining icefields on Earth. Over the past three decades, the consensus among researchers studying salmon is that widespread, intact freshwater habitat in places like these transboundary watersheds is critically important for maintaining healthy and harvestable salmon populations.

Transboundary watersheds are not immune to emerging pressures brought about in large part by climate change. Warmer air temperatures, higher amounts of precipitation falling as rain, and less snow stored in the mountains of transboundary watersheds will impact salmon populations by changing the way rivers flow and in some places warming the water in which they spawn and rear.

In the Taku and Stikine watersheds, nearly 290 miles of new salmon habitat could be created as glaciers recede from their current locations. As a result, conversations about conserving salmon habitat should not only include discussion about present habitat, but

also the habitat that will be formed in the future. While some mining companies may look at glacier retreat as an opportunity to explore new gold deposits, others view glacier retreat as a possible silver lining that will at least provide more habitat for salmon and give them a better chance for survival.

Salmon transform the landscapes of which they are a part, bringing nutrients from the Pacific Ocean and providing a seasonal pulse of life that enriches the ecosystem, and the way humans interact with it, for miles around. While climate change is impacting Alaska salmon in the open ocean and in the freshwater streams and lakes they depend upon for spawning, the *FISH Act* and *Alaska Salmon Research Task Force Act* can create opportunities to protect and sustain present and future populations of these resilient fish. These bills can establish key tools that will help us identify impacts quickly and deploy effective solutions informed by local communities and stakeholders.

Now is the time to invest in Alaska so that we can better understand and protect the places where wild salmon spawn and rear. Now is the time to establish salmon strongholds that provide the highest level of protection for intact salmon habitat.

Thank you for your focus on these important issues and for the opportunity to provide perspective on these bills. Many thanks, in particular, to Congressman Young and Congressman Huffman—for your work to defend clean water and wild salmon. We support both the *FISH Act* and the *Alaska Salmon Research Task Force Act*, as both are critical to the future sustainability of Alaska's salmon runs and the communities, fisheries, and economies that depend on them. We look forward to working with the Committee to advance salmon conservation related legislation.

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