

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

February 4, 2013

Jane Lubchenco,
Administrator
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
1401 Constitution Avenue
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Administrator Lubchenco:

I write regarding the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA) recent contract with the Oregon Consensus Program and the William D. Ruckelshaus Center to conduct a "situation assessment" of long term Columbia Basin salmon recovery planning.

I understand that last December NOAA invited selected individuals to participate in a closed, one-on-one interview process conducted by "two neutral, university-based institutions" to "better understand and explore relevant issues and interests of involved parties and situation dynamics," apparently resulting in an assessment report later this year.

I am concerned with NOAA's actions for several reasons.

First, NOAA has failed to clearly explain either the scope or the necessity of this process. In my view, NOAA's timing and rationale for launching yet another costly taxpayer-funded planning exercise is highly questionable amidst several years' data showing near-record salmon runs in the Columbia Basin.

According to publicly available data by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and University of Washington, for each of the past five years, chinook salmon runs have ranged between 480,000 to 850,000 and steelhead have numbered between 235,000 to 600,000. Last year, the Army Corps of Engineers counted more than 1.5 million chinook, steelhead, sockeye and coho salmon. Rather than launching a new process, NOAA should be more clearly explaining what is necessary to remove Columbia and Snake Basin salmon from the Endangered Species Act list.

More than a decade ago, NOAA released "interim" numerical goals for salmon in the Columbia and Snake basins. For multiple salmon life cycles, salmon numbers have far exceeded NOAA's own numbers and have far surpassed counts during the early to mid 1990's when NOAA determined that several salmon populations were "threatened" or "endangered" under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). In a 2011 report to Congress, NOAA itself characterized the

runs of six of seven ESA-listed salmon populations in the Columbia and Snake Basins as either “stable” or “increasing.” More processes to “plan how to plan” will not change that.

Second, I am concerned that this NOAA-led “assessment” could interfere with or impose new requirements on federally-approved and currently ongoing local salmon recovery plans and activities, as well as state and tribal hatchery programs that are currently contributing positively to record and near-record salmon returns. Further, it could delay or undermine Congressionally-directed independent scientific review of highly questionable salmon biological opinion directives, which as written, would adversely impact the Columbia and Snake basin agriculture and use of crop protection products.

Most importantly, NOAA’s “situation assessment” could undermine the successful and unprecedented collaboration of federal agencies with the states of Washington, Idaho, Montana, and several Columbia River tribes to develop a legally-sound ESA salmon Biological Opinion governing the continued operation of the Northwest’s vital federal hydropower dams. The hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars NOAA plans to use for this “assessment” to solicit likely recycled opinions will add little, if any, benefit, and worse, could potentially undo years of progress made to bring diverse Northwest entities together on these complex issues.

I request that NOAA postpone this effort and instead re-double this Administration’s commitment and focus to defend the Federal Columbia River Power System Biological Opinion crafted with the support of three Northwest states, numerous tribes and other stakeholders, rather than create another distractive process that could engender divisive proposals, such as dam removal, and provide fodder for new costly and unproductive litigation, all to the detriment of the listed stocks and the region’s economy.

As a result of the Committee’s oversight responsibilities over the ESA and Northwest salmon programs, please be advised that the Committee will seek review of NOAA’s process for pursuing and carrying out the “situation assessment” contracts with the university-based institutions. Your staff’s and your prompt cooperation in that regard is appreciated.

Sincerely,



Doc Hastings
Chairman