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Willamette River



PHOTO: AARON HOCKLEY

WILLAMETTE RIVER, OREGON

State: Oregon

Threat: Dam operations

At Risk: Water quality; salmon and steelhead

Summary

In the Willamette River basin, wild spring chinook salmon and winter steelhead populations are on the brink of extinction, and we can do something to save them. Many of the measures necessary to help salmon, steelhead and Pacific lamprey, such as passage at dams, improved water quality and more natural river flows, have already been identified in a 2008 plan created by federal agencies. Yet for more than a decade, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the federal agency responsible for executing these beneficial measures, has failed to fully implement the plan. The Corps must take immediate action to improve operations at its dams to stem the tide of decline, and Congress must fund this critical work.

The River

The Willamette River in Oregon flows 187 miles out of the Cascades and Coast Range Mountains to its confluence with the Columbia River in the city of Portland. The river drains 11,487 square miles, nearly 12 percent of the state, flowing through a wide, fertile valley that is home to 75 percent of Oregon's population and is the state's agricultural powerhouse. Thirteen significant tributaries, including the Clackamas, Molalla, McKenzie and North and South Santiam rivers, feed the mainstem Willamette.

Half a million fish once returned to the Willamette each year, a silver thread of life extending from the Pacific, surging above the pounding waters of Willamette Falls, weaving up Cascade and Coast Range streams to spawn the next generation and supporting Native Americans for millennia. Pacific lamprey, an important food source for Native American tribes, also rely on the health of the Willamette River. There are 25 major dams in the Willamette Basin, thirteen of which are operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Dams block access to 90 percent of historic, high quality salmon and steelhead habitat in some Willamette tributaries.

The Threat

Built and operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, a network of thirteen dams are located throughout the Willamette basin blocking access to critical salmon and steelhead spawning habitat. Adult chinook salmon and steelhead cannot get over the dams — there are no functioning fish ladders. Juvenile fish struggle to migrate downstream through the large reservoirs and often cannot move past the dams without being forced through turbines.

Along with the physical barriers these dams impose, they further harm fish and the river by altering natural flows, contributing to diminished water quality and degrading riparian environments.

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In 2008, following litigation from Willamette Riverkeeper, the federal government agreed to make significant improvements to water quality and fish passage at the Army Corps' dams. In addition, funds were provided over a period of years to make improvements to habitat affected by the dams. At present, improved fish collection facilities have been constructed on the North and South Santiam. Plans are underway to build downstream fish passage structures at Cougar Dam in the McKenzie System, and at Detroit Dam on the North Santiam — both projects will not be completed until after 2022. Unfortunately, after nearly a decade of work, the Army Corps continues to delay needed and agreed to improvements at these dams. The result — Willamette salmon and steelhead populations are circling the drain and Pacific lamprey populations continue to suffer.

Over many years, estimated historic runs of nearly 300,000 spring chinook and 200,000 winter steelhead were reduced to a few thousand naturally reproducing fish. Last year, fewer than 5,000 wild spring chinook and less than 1,000 wild winter steelhead made it back to the river. This represents just one to two percent of the historic populations that once returned to spawn in the system's cold, forested streams like the Molalla, Santiam and McKenzie rivers. Willamette salmon and steelhead face a high probability of disappearing forever with a ninety-nine percent chance of local extinction in some tributaries. Without drastic action now, we will lose these icons of our landscapes and Northwest heritage forever.

What Must Be Done

The Army Corps is conducting a comprehensive analysis of the operations and maintenance of the Willamette Valley System, but we must act immediately to save these iconic species. The agency must make structural modifications to the dams to facilitate downstream passage for juvenile salmon. The Army Corps must also continue to improve upstream passage for adult fish so that they can gain access to their historic spawning habitat. Congress must secure the necessary federal funding and ensure that the Army Corps and key action agencies identify and implement the changes that are necessary to save and recover the Willamette and its wild fish.



PHOTO: TRAVIS WILLIAMS

WILLAMETTE FALLS, WILLAMETTE RIVER, OREGON

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