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LARRY CRAIG

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NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
September 21, 2006

Dan Whiting (202) 224-8078
Sid Smith (208) 342-7985

Salmon Recovery: Salvation or Supper?
by Senator Larry Craig

After the spotted owl was listed as an endangered species in the mid-1990s, a certain bumper sticker became popular throughout much of the Pacific Northwest: “Spotted owl tastes like chicken.” Part of the humor was the shock value – the outrageous suggestion that someone would deliberately kill a federally protected species, just to eat it.

Along the same lines, here’s another true story: Just recently, a group of environmentalists gathered in Portland to call attention to the plight of the Pacific Northwest’s endangered salmon populations by cooking up and eating...salmon. Sometimes truth is indeed stranger than fiction.

You’re not alone if you see the inconsistency in a federal policy that declares a species to be protected, requires massive sums of money to protect and recover that species, yet still allows hundreds or even thousands of them to be commercially harvested and eaten every year.

A recent article in the Wall Street Journal pointed out that Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) will spend nearly \$700 million on fish and wildlife recovery this year. For some Northwest power customers, this expenditure adds 30 percent to their electric bills. For a working family struggling to make ends meet, or for a small business struggling to create jobs or provide health insurance for its workers, 30 percent is a substantial chunk of money.

Now, I don’t mean to suggest we shouldn’t spend money to save the Northwest’s salmon. They must be saved, because they are an important part of the culture and the history of our region. That’s why I continue to examine whether our efforts to save them are really working.

We spend millions on federal salmon hatcheries, and those hatcheries are successfully sustaining salmon populations. In fact, about two-thirds of all returning adults each year are hatchery fish. But then, we turn around and tell fishermen that they can catch and eat those same hatchery salmon. Do our hatcheries exist to help salmon populations recover, or to put a salmon fillet on your plate?

In order to restore our salmon to even greater numbers than we now have, we need to expand what we know about their full lifecycle. Currently, our knowledge of their time in the ocean is woefully inadequate, but we do know quite a bit about a salmon’s life in our rivers. Once we know more about the salmon’s time in the ocean, that will help us understand which freshwater efforts make the most difference to help them.

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We also know that some of the best salmon returns on record have come in the last 10 years, more than 30 years after four dams were built on the lower Snake River. Breaching these dams would devastate the regional economy, and it isn't even certain to improve survival, because it would do nothing to alleviate other threats to salmon. If the dams were gone, predators – human and otherwise – and ocean conditions would still claim huge numbers of fish. Dam breaching is not the silver bullet solution it's made out to be by its advocates.

Salmon can successfully navigate the dams because they are a phenomenally flexible species. Human beings are very adaptive too. Let's use this flexibility to learn more about salmon and improve our recovery efforts. We should throw away what doesn't work and find ways to improve the measures that do. We can save this species without breaching the dams and strangling our economy. We can get to the point where it actually makes sense to have our salmon and eat it too.