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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
FRIDAY, MAY 2, 2008**

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Tribes and feds end decades of legal battles to begin new era
Special tribal ceremony at sacred Columbia River Basin site today
underscores collaborative approach that puts fish first

Dallesport, Wash. – Years of divisiveness over salmon recovery efforts in the Columbia River Basin ended today for the tribes and federal agencies that signed unprecedented agreements designed to deliver specific, scientifically valid biological results for the region’s fish. The agreements, celebrated today with traditional tribal ceremonies at a place of cultural significance in the Columbia River Gorge, are now called The Columbia Basin Fish Accords.

The Accords are designed to supplement biological opinions for listed salmon and steelhead and the Northwest Power and Conservation Council’s fish and wildlife program. They provide firm commitments to hydro, habitat and hatchery actions; greater clarity about biological benefits and secure funding for 10 years. NOAA Fisheries is preparing to release its latest biological opinions for the U.S. District Court of Oregon on May 5, 2008.

The Accords were signed at Columbia Hills State Park, a historical village and fishing site where, carved into the rocks above, is “Tsagaglalal,” or “She Who Watches.” Tribal legend explains that Tsagaglalal was turned into stone so she could remain at her village to watch over the river and its people for eternity.

“It gives us great pride and hope to be in this special place, with the spirit of Tsagaglalal watching us – our witnesses to this day, hearing us say that through these Accords we commit to doing more to protect and restore the region’s fish populations,” said Fidelia Andy, tribal council member for the Yakama Nation and chair of the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission.

The proposed agreements and corresponding public comment period were first announced April 7, 2008, and today’s signing signaled the successful completion of that process.

“These Accords move the focus away from gavel-to-gavel management and toward gravel-to-gravel management,” said Steve Wright, BPA administrator. “By putting litigation behind us and putting actions to help fish in front of us, we will better ensure that Columbia Basin fish will benefit.”

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The signing of these Accords culminates two years of extensive negotiations, at the behest of U.S. District Court of Oregon Judge James Redden, among Indian tribes and the federal action agencies that have responsibilities for operating and maintaining the Federal Columbia River Power System (FCRPS) as well as for selling the power from these facilities: the Bonneville Power Administration, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation. The FCRPS action agencies have agreements with the following tribes and tribal entities:

- The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation;
- The Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon;
- The Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation;
- The Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission;
- The Confederated Tribes of the Colville Indian Reservation.

With the Accords signed, the tribes and federal agencies will immediately move forward with new projects as well as continuing existing projects throughout the Columbia River Basin. In addition, the federal agencies have also reached agreement with the states of Idaho and Montana. The state of Washington has announced its support for this partnership approach.

Under these agreements, the federal agencies and tribes will work together as partners “on the ground” to provide tangible survival benefits for salmon recovery – by upgrading passage over federal dams, by restoring river and estuary habitat, and by creative use of hatcheries. They will also advocate for the agreements in other regional forums.

While the Accords address the needs of salmon and steelhead, they also focus on non-listed species such as Pacific lamprey. Specifically, under these Accords, the Corps plans to work to implement adult and juvenile passage improvement measures for lamprey.

“Pacific lamprey are immensely important to our region,” said Witt Anderson, Corps program director. “Our planned passage improvements for the benefit of lamprey are but one example of the holistic approach to fish recovery being taken by partners to these Accords.”

For specific details of the Accords and the types of projects involved, please visit: www.critfc.org and www.salmonrecovery.gov. For an electronic press kit, available this afternoon, please visit BPA’s Web site at: www.bpa.gov/corporate/BPAnews/Perspective/.

Additional comments from regional tribal, federal and other leaders about these Accords:

“These fish accords respect the sovereignty of the Tribes. They break from the history of federal agencies developing a plan themselves, and then telling the Tribes what they would or could provide for salmon. This did not work. Misunderstandings, hard feelings, and litigation are what we produced. The foundation of these accords is respect among sovereigns -- respect for the expertise and authority of the Tribes. Working with Tribes as sovereigns allowed us to put our hearts and minds to looking for opportunity and solutions for the rivers and the salmon. We have a lot of work to do to restore salmon, lamprey, and steelhead. We pause for a few hours on this day to celebrate a new partnership, a new respect for our sovereignty, to honor this new accord. Tomorrow we return to our sacred work with vigor, dedication, and optimism.”
~Chairman Ron Suppah, Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon

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“The Umatilla Tribe has long recognized that collaboration and partnerships are essential to salmon recovery. Each one of us brings something special and unique to this agreement. It’s this diversity of resources and knowledge that will be instrumental to our success. The Umatilla Tribe knows this to be true based on demonstrated success of restoring salmon to the Umatilla River. I am hopeful that the next ten years will see great strides in the health of the Columbia River Basin, the salmon, and those who depend on their existence.”

~Chairman Antone Minthorn, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation

“Today we set aside litigation and opt for cooperation with our federal partners. We have been in the courts for ten years and have not gained the resources needed to protect these creations. Now, working towards recovery, we will focus our efforts and energy on the task of fish recovery instead of continually girding ourselves for litigation. Cooperation will be the nature of our relationship recognizing that both fish and hydroelectric power are important to the Yakama Nation and to the people of the Northwest.”

~ Chairman Ralph Sampson, Jr., Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation

“Our people and the fish that are part of our lives come from the headwaters of the Columbia River Basin. These Accords will allow work to take place for the benefit of fish from the ocean up to the headwaters, addressing the whole salmon life cycle along the way. We think these Accords are a turning point in the way people in the Basin address fish recovery and we look forward to being an integrated part of this strong partnership. This finally brings funding for projects to the fish of the upper Columbia. In the past, all production measures were put out of reach of the Colville people. These Accords bring fish back to the Colville people.”

~ Chairman Mike Marchand, Confederated Tribes of the Colville Indian Reservation

“Today, as partners, we are making a tremendous step forward in an endeavor that will bring benefits for decades to come.”

~ Col. Steven Miles, Commander, Northwestern Division, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

“These Accords show that, working together, we can improve habitat for fish while respecting traditional agricultural values.”

~ Bill McDonald, Bureau of Reclamation Regional Director

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