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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
Sept. 15, 2009

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### **NOAA Strengthens 2008 Columbia River Salmon Protection Strategy**

*Plan based on sound science; strengthened contingency plan added as insurance for salmon*

Backed by sound science, strong stakeholder support and extensive outreach, the federal government today filed with a United States district court a strengthened plan to implement NOAA's 2008 biological opinion governing operation of the Federal Columbia River Power System. The plan bolsters protection for salmon and steelhead on the Columbia and Snake rivers in the Pacific Northwest by adding contingency measures that provide extra insurance that the fish will survive with an adequate potential for recovery.

Thirteen populations of salmon and steelhead in the Columbia Basin are listed for protection under the federal Endangered Species Act.

"The time has come to move out of the courtroom and get to work recovering salmon and preserving the region's unique way-of-life," said Commerce Secretary Gary Locke. "This biological opinion, backed by sound science and tremendous state and tribal support, will help preserve the vibrancy and vitality of the Columbia and Snake River basins for generations to come."

While the strengthened plan, known officially as the Adaptive Management Implementation Plan, includes further study of lower Snake River dam breaching as a possibility, it is viewed as an action of last resort. Dam breaching studies will be initiated if a significant decline in listed Snake River salmon populations is detected and if an analysis shows that dam breaching is necessary to stem those declines.

The strengthened plan implements NOAA's biological opinion in a way that more aggressively protects fish populations from decline from a variety of factors including the effects of climate change and other uncertainties that could emerge over the 10-year life of the biological opinion. The plan includes:

Immediate acceleration and enhancement of mitigation actions.

Expanded research, monitoring and evaluation to quickly detect unexpected changes in fish populations.

Specific biological "triggers" that, if exceeded, will activate a range of near and long-term responses to address significant fish declines. For instance, very low returns of a species could trigger increased hydro actions, stepped-up predator-control and hatchery measures, and possible modifications to existing harvest agreements.

Starting immediately, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will prepare a study plan to develop scope, budget and schedule of studies needed regarding potential breaching of the lower Snake River dams.

“This plan is scientifically sound and precautionary. It is flexible enough to adapt to future changes, specific enough to tell us when immediate actions are needed, and forward-looking enough so that it will remain effective over its ten-year lifespan. For the sake of the people and fish of the Northwest, it’s time to set this plan in motion,” said Jane Lubchenco, Ph.D., under secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and NOAA Administrator.

The filing of the strengthened plan follows a thorough consideration by the Obama Administration of the 2008 biological opinion and the science on which it is based. The administration listened to the views of federal, state, and tribal representatives; federal agency and independent scientists; and the parties suing the government over the biological opinion. The plan also responds to the points raised in a May 18 letter from Judge James A. Redden, who is presiding over the lawsuit. The Obama Administration appreciated the opportunity Judge Redden offered to provide its views and built on a collaborative process encouraged by the court.

The implementation plan accelerates and enhances measures in the biological opinion to reduce harm to salmon, significantly improves efforts to monitor and evaluate the ecosystem and status of the stocks, and establishes significant measures to be taken if the status of the stocks declines.

The biological opinion is required by the Endangered Species Act to protect the Columbia Basin’s listed salmon and steelhead populations. The strengthened implementation plan was jointly prepared by NOAA and the three federal agencies involved in the operation of the dams: the Bonneville Power Administration, Corps of Engineers and Bureau of Reclamation.

NOAA said the biological opinion as implemented through the plan is legally and biologically sound. The agency said it is based on the best available science, ensures that operation of the hydropower system will not jeopardize the continued existence of listed species and ensures an adequate potential for their recovery.

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