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Contact: Dr. Deborah Giles, (916) 531-1516

Columbia Basin Hydropower Draft Review Ignores Latest Killer Whale Science

*Southern Resident Killer Whales Depend on Columbia and Snake River
Salmon for Survival and Recovery*

Friday Harbor, WA— Eight Southern Resident killer whale experts submitted technical comments today on the Columbia River System Operations draft Environmental Impact Statement (CRSO DEIS), which includes fourteen federal dams in the Columbia River Basin. Despite recognition by NOAA that the Southern Resident killer whales’ “extinction is almost certain in the immediate future because of a rapid population decline,” and the well-settled fact that the population’s paramount threat is a shortage of prey, the CRSO DEIS gives scant consideration to the connection between Columbia Basin salmon and the survival and reproductive success of the Southern Resident killer whales.

The CRSO DEIS concludes that the Multiple Objective Alternative 3 (MO3), i.e. lower Snake River dam breaching alternative, would result in “a moderate to major increase” in adult salmon over the long term and that would “increase the prey base available to . . . killer whale[s].” However, the CRSO DEIS concludes without analysis and contrary to the science that the effect for the prey-limited Southern Resident killer whales would be only “minor.”

The killer whale experts wrote that they found “no support” for the conclusion that the impact on the severely nutritionally stressed Southern Resident killer whales of a potentially major increase in salmon would be “minor.” The scientists conclude—based on a review of recent science, including NOAA’ own studies and conclusions—that although “Lower Snake River dam breaching by itself may not be enough to recover [Southern Resident killer whales], in our expert opinion, recovery of this population of whales is not achievable without Lower Snake River dam breaching.”

“I’m incredibly disappointed that the Southern Resident killer whales are hardly mentioned in the nearly 8,000 page study, although these are arguably the most-studied whales on the planet. The federal agencies fail to consider any of the recent scientific literature documenting the Southern Resident killer whales’ frequent occurrence at the mouth of the Columbia Basin, confirming they are foraging on Columbia Basin stocks, or connecting the reproductive success and health of the Southern Residents to Columbia Basin spring Chinook,” said Dr. Deborah Giles of the University of Washington and [Wild Orca](#).

“The draft EIS ignores a large body of science, some of it conducted by NOAA itself, that finds that we must recover Columbia Basin spring Chinook runs to avoid extinction of the Southern Resident killer whales and improve reproductive success,” said Dr. Sam Wasser of the University of Washington, [Center for Conservation Biology](#).

“To save the whales requires taking action that will increase salmon abundance, and the Columbia Basin is the largest river in the whale’s range. It doesn’t take a killer whale scientist to know that what happens in the Columbia Basin will directly impact the Southern Resident killer whales,” said Giles.

Signatories of the comment letter included Dr. Deborah Giles, Research Biologist, Univ. Washington; Dr. Samuel Wasser, Endowed Chair In Conservation Biology, Univ. Washington; Kenneth C. Balcomb III, Executive Director and Senior Scientist, Center for Whale Research; Dr. David E. Bain, Chief Scientist, Orca Conservancy; Howard Garrett, Board President, Orca Network; Dr. Scott Veirs, President, Beam Reach Marine Science and Sustainability; Monika Wieland Shields, Research Biologist, Orca Behavior Institute; Dr. Julie Woodruff, Science Advisor, Orca Behavior Institute