# [***CRACKS IN THE DAM***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6222-26N1-DYTH-G26F-00000-00&context=1516831)

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GOP Congressman Proposes To Restore Lower Snake River and Save Salmon From Extinction

The last time I was on the Snake River was two years ago as part of the Nimiipuu River Rendezvous, an annual convergence of tribal leaders, environmentalists, salmon anglers and outdoor enthusiasts to call for the removal of the four lower Snake River dams. Before these four dams were built, the Snake River was a wild and turbulent river cutting through dramatic canyons and across vast stretches of sagebrush. Finally, for the first time since the dams were built in the 1960s and 70s, a member of Congress has proposed removing all four dams.

Millions of salmon would return to the Snake River every year from the Pacific Ocean to their high-elevation spawning grounds in the Rocky Mountains. As the Columbia River's largest tributary, the Snake River once produced almost half the salmon in the Columbia Basin, making it one of the most productive river systems for salmon in the world. Millions of salmon would return to the Snake River every year from the Pacific Ocean to their high-elevation spawning grounds in the Rocky Mountains. This abundance supported tribal nations since time immemorial and provided an important food source for countless endangered species, including southern resident orcas.

However, this abundance was lost with the construction of the dams, and ***Tribes***, environmentalists and anglers have been fighting to remove these dams for decades, arguing that keeping them in place means extinction for salmon and everything in the ecosystem. Independent scientists have suggested that over 1 million salmon would return to the Columbia Basin every year if the lower Snake River dams were removed, and leading orca researchers have stated unequivocally that the southern resident orcas are unlikely to survive if these dams remain. Restoring the lower Snake would be the largest river restoration project in the world.

On February 7th, Rep. Mike Simpson (R-ID), a Republican from Idaho, released a video outlining a new approach to the Snake River debate to address the complex and interrelated issues around salmon, energy, agriculture and infrastructure.

What's in the Plan?

Investing in salmon recovery across the Northwest is essential to recovering endangered southern resident orcas, that rely on healthy chinook salmon stocks from Monterey Bay to British Columbia. Rep. Simpson's proposal would take two of the most significant actions needed to save these orcas from extinction: restoring the lower Snake River and investing in habitat restoration.

"My staff and I approached this challenge with the idea that there must be a way to restore Idaho salmon and keep the four lower Snake River dams. But after exhausting dozens of possible solutions, we weren't able to find one...In the end we realized there is no viable path that can allow us to keep the dams in place." Rep. Mike Simpson

The proposal would also invest $3 billion in habitat conservation and water quality programs in the Salish Sea, along the coast, throughout the Columbia Basin and beyond. There are incentives to remove smaller dams that block fish passage and funding to restore salmon to currently blocked areas in the upper Columbia and upper Snake rivers.

While these investments in salmon and river restoration would be huge, they are just a fraction of the $34 billion proposal. That's because the proposal includes several important infrastructure upgrades and investments to replace the services currently provided by the dams like building rail lines to replace barging, extending irrigation lines, expanding renewable energy like wind and solar and investing in waterfront redevelopment in cities like Lewiston and Clarkston.

This isn't the first time people have thought about replacing the services provided by these dams. In early 2020, Gov. Jay Inslee's Snake River Stakeholder Process had compiled interviews, reports, and recommendations from dozens of stakeholders throughout the Northwest. Gov. Kate Brown has also long advocated for a comprehensive approach that would support impacted communities and fully replace the services provided by the dams. With all these conversations, community leaders in the inland Northwest have started to reimagine what a free-flowing Snake River could look like and how their region would benefit from it.

While there is a lot to be excited about in this proposal, there are also some areas where we have concerns. For instance, the proposal would restrict public participation and the ability to hold the government accountable for upholding some federal environmental laws. Other dams would also receive lengthy license extensions. And the proposal wouldn't start removing the lower Snake River dams for 10 years. Given the extinction crisis southern resident orcas and salmon face, we need to move much faster to restore the Snake River.

Where Do We Go From Here?

The proposal that Rep. Simpson rolled out is just that: a proposal. This is the start of a much needed and long-overdue conversation about the future of salmon, energy and infrastructure in the Pacific Northwest. There are certainly details to work out, but this is a great starting place and includes several big, bold actions.

Large-scale salmon recovery is critical to ***Tribes*** throughout the Pacific Northwest, and many of them heralded this announcement. The Nez Perce ***Tribe*** has been at the forefront of fighting to restore the lower Snake River and its salmon for generations. With this new proposal, Tribal Chairman Shannon Wheeler says, "There is potential for a lot of healing with this legislation."

Defenders is eager to work with other stakeholders, state and tribal governments, and members of Congress to craft a holistic plan that meets the region's needs. While compromising will be important, Defenders and our allies will work to ensure that we aren't opening the door for environmental degradation elsewhere. As this proposal moves forward, we remain committed to advancing these shared goals:

Bringing wild salmon back to abundance on a free-flowing lower Snake River

Honoring tribal cultures and commitments made to tribal governments in treaties

Providing affordable and clean renewable energy

Supporting the needs of rural fishing and farming communities from the Pacific Coast to the Rocky Mountains

With this new proposal, the Northwest has a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to act boldly. But we will need other members of Congress to commit to restoring the lower Snake River. To do that, we need your help!

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the Nimiipuu River Rendezvous was canceled in 2020, and it's unlikely to happen this year. Still, people are finding ways to come together and call on Congress to remove the lower Snake River dams. Defenders has teamed up with partners from across the Northwest to host a virtual Rally 'Round the River; Standing Up for Snake River Salmon, Orcas, and the Pacific Northwest. Join us on February 25th as we discuss what this proposal means for the Northwest and how you can take action!

If you can't join us on the 25th, you can still take action today! Click here to send a message to members of Congress, urging them to support restoring the lower Snake River and to work with Rep. Simpson on a comprehensive plan to achieve this goal.

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