



NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE COUNCIL

Testimony of

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Before the Assembly Water, Parks and Wildlife Committee

On

California's Salmon Crisis: Understanding the Severity of the Crisis and the State's  
Role in Recovery

State Capitol, March 10, 2009

Good morning Chairman Huffman and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee today. My name is Doug Obegi, and I am a staff attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council. I am here today to talk about the decline of Central Valley salmon species and potential solutions to meet the water needs of fish and people. Much of my testimony is drawn from a report we issued last year entitled "Fish Out of Water: How Water Management in the Bay-Delta Threatens the Future of California's Salmon Fishery," a copy of which was distributed to the Committee this morning.

Central Valley fall run Chinook salmon have become the backbone of the State's sport and commercial salmon fisheries, as a result of the decline of other salmon runs in California. As the Committee knows, in 2008 the salmon fishery was shut down for the first time in the State's history, as a result of historic low numbers of fall run Chinook salmon returning to spawn. Yet other salmon and steelhead runs in the Central Valley are doing even worse; winter run Chinook salmon, spring run Chinook salmon, and Central Valley steelhead are all listed as threatened or endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act because their populations have plummeted in recent decades. I will not go into detail about the status of the species because I expect that other experts testifying today will explain the magnitude of the declines and the current status of the species, but we would be happy to provide the Committee with more information if requested.

There are a number of critical factors that have led to the decline of Central Valley salmonids, including water pollution, habitat alteration, alteration of flows and construction of dams, invasive species, and poor ocean conditions in the recent past. However, the operations of the State Water Project and Central Valley Project have played a critical role in the decline of

Central Valley salmon and steelhead, and ultimately, operations of the water projects must play a critical role in the recovery of these species. Both the federal District Court, and the National Marine Fisheries Service, have determined that current and proposed operations of the state and federal water projects jeopardize the continued existence of the salmon species listed under the Endangered Species Act. Taken together, these threats to salmon, combined with climate change, could result in California losing its Chinook salmon fishery (California already lost its Coho fishery), and potentially seeing the extinction of some of these species.

Fortunately, however, there are solutions to meet the needs of salmon while also meeting the water needs for people. There are four primary points I want to make.

#### Invest in Alternative Water Supplies

First, some of the most important solutions to enable California to meet the water needs of fish and people will occur outside of the legal Delta. California needs to invest in alternative water supplies that increase regional self-sufficiency and increase the reliability of water deliveries. Based primarily on data from the Department of Water Resources, NRDC has determined that we could generate more new water each year from these alternative water supply sources (particularly improved urban water use efficiency and conservation, improved conjunctive use of groundwater, urban design that allows the capture and infiltration of stormwater, and wastewater recycling) than we have ever exported from the Delta. As both the Legislative Analysts Office and the *Delta Vision Strategic Plan* have recognized, these are some of the most cost-effective, environmentally friendly water supply solutions.

#### Manage the State and Federal Water Projects as a System to Meet the Water Needs of People and the Environment

Second, it is critically important to recognize that the state and federal water projects are operated as a system, from the terminal upstream reservoirs to the pumps in the Delta. In order to restore and sustain salmon, we must make changes to how the projects are operated both in the Delta and particularly in the upstream reservoirs. Focusing on the delta pumps is only a small part of the impacts of the water projects on salmon, and it misses many of the other impacts from the projects on salmon. Ultimately, in order to restore and sustain salmon, we must make changes to how the system is operated. Many of these changes can be made without having significant water supply impacts, and some of them can actually benefit both people and the environment.

#### Review and Implement a Revised Salmon Doubling Program

Third, California's plan for doubling salmon populations to meet the requirements of state and federal law have not been updated since the adoption of the 1995 Anadromous Fish Restoration Program Plan. Since that time, however, significant new scientific information has been developed on the threats and impacts to Central Valley salmon and the potential new solutions to restore and sustain the fish. With a new federal administration in place, now is the time to review and revise this plan in a coordinated fashion with the federal fish agencies to develop a blueprint for restoring salmon and our salmon fishery. This would help ensure that we get "the most bang for the buck" from our limited public monies for restoration, and that we are addressing the most critical needs of, and threats to, the species.

### Continue to Invest in Win-Win Solutions to Restore and Sustain Salmon

Finally, California should continue to implement restoration and recovery actions, many of which can be win-win solutions. For instance, the Tehama Colusa Canal Authority, NRDC and other organizations are working to replace the Red Bluff Diversion Dam on the Sacramento River with a state of the art pumping plant that would improve water delivery reliability and greatly benefit migrating salmon. Likewise, California can build on the successful partnership with farmers in the Yolo Bypass to restore additional floodplains in the Delta and upstream, which can be managed for both fish and farming and reduce the flooding risks to urban areas. And NRDC and the Friant Water Users Authority are working hard to enact federal legislation to restore salmon to the San Joaquin River and to develop a water management program to minimize or reduce water supply impacts of the project.

### Conclusion

There is no question that things look grim right now for salmon, and climate change threatens the fragile gains some Central Valley salmon populations had made in recent years. If we don't take action, we could permanently lose the salmon fishery and some of the runs could go extinct.

However, we should remember that California's prior investments to restore and sustain salmon have made progress: habitat restoration, screening of water intakes, construction of the temperature control device at Shasta, and other measures helped many salmon species recover from the historically low levels seen at the end of the last drought in 1992. There are success stories, like the rebound of spring run salmon populations in Butte Creek, that show that our efforts can pay off.

Ultimately, NRDC believes that California can restore and sustain salmon for future generations and meet the water needs to sustain agricultural and urban communities. Doing so will require changes in how we operate the state and federal water projects, continued investments in habitat restoration and addressing other stressors, investing in development of alternative water supplies, and implementing a revised salmon doubling policy to guide our actions. If we work together, California can meet the water needs of fish and people and sustain salmon, and salmon fishing, for future generations.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing. I would be happy to answer any questions the Committee has.