



27 January 2014 (via email)

The Honorable Penny Pritzker
Secretary of Commerce
TheSec@doc.gov

The Honorable Sally Jewell
Secretary of the Interior
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The Honorable John Laird
Secretary
California Natural Resources Agency
secretary@resources.ca.gov

RE: Request an Urgent Meeting to Prepare a Drought Action Plan to Conserve
California Central Valley Chinook Salmon Populations

Dear Secretaries Pritzker, Jewell, and Laird:

We are writing to request you urgently convene a joint meeting of your agencies having responsibility for the conservation and management for California Central Valley Chinook salmon, whose water decisions affect the survival and migration of these fish. Two of the four Chinook runs, the Sacramento winter-run and the spring-run, are ESA-listed. Another, the fall-run, is responsible for as much as 90 percent of California's salmon catch, and as much as 50 percent of Oregon's ocean salmon production.

All four of these Chinook runs are in immediate peril due to the drought and a large percentage of the 2013 production may be lost if no action is taken. Drought has left reservoirs unseasonably low resulting in dangerous flow reductions during this critical time for incubating fall run salmon eggs and out-migrating fry. The Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers and many of their tributaries currently hold emerging fall run Chinook salmon fry. Many other wild juvenile salmon, including the listed winter and spring run Chinook, are still rearing in the upper portions of rivers waiting for winter and spring pulse flows to aid in their downstream migration. The basic pattern that occurs everywhere in the Central Valley is that juvenile salmon head toward the Delta from mid-January to May. Thus, the window of opportunity to act to save these fish is very short.

A meeting, or summit, needs to be convened quickly among your regional fishery directors, the regional head of the Bureau of Reclamation, the California Departments of Fish & Wildlife and Water Resources, and key leaders from the fishing community (commercial and recreational) along, perhaps, with non-government fishery scientists and other stakeholders, to map out a drought action plan. CSPA, GGSA, Coastside Fishing Club and PCFFA are fully prepared to participate, as are leaders from other salmon fishing groups with whom we have discussed this.

We note that drought action plans are being mapped out for cities and agriculture. The same is needed for drought-impacted fisheries. Lack of action is likely to result in severe economic dislocation to fishery-dependent communities in 2016 and potentially beyond.

A day-long meeting, ideally in the next two weeks, is needed to identify and implement strategies to increase survival of hatchery and naturally produced juvenile salmon. To the extent further meetings, or an ad hoc working group or formal task force, are needed, can be decided upon at an initial meeting. Our concern is that we do not become distracted quibbling over process but get on with the initiation of an effective joint action plan to save as many fish as possible.

The most important immediate action, in our opinion, is to facilitate the outmigration of as many wild and hatchery salmon juveniles as possible from the rivers, through the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta and into the lower delta estuary or San Francisco Bay. Considering the forecasted dry weather, a well-defined plan must be in place so that it can be implemented in time to avert an avoidable crisis. Waiting until spring when water temperatures in rivers will become problematic will not provide sufficient time for implementation of a viable suite of solutions.

In addition to moving as many of these juvenile fish safely through the system – which undoubtedly will involve a much greater level of hauling fish around the Delta than in normal years – options to improve in-stream conditions for salmon and other fish also need to be considered as part of an action plan. We are concerned that a great deal of attention has been focused on proposals to relax environmental protections this year. Most fishery-related requirements provide a lower level of protection during dry years. Relaxing standards that already provide less protection in dry years could be devastating to salmon and other wildlife. Rather than further weakening protections, water managers should be searching for ways to improve conditions for salmon during the coming months especially those that might also help water users.

In addition, we recommend the following types of measures to improve salmon outmigration be included in the meeting discussion to consider their feasibility:

- 1) A strategy that addresses the timing and release point of hatchery smolts this season to minimize predation pressure and competition with naturally produced Chinook that are still holding in upper portions of rivers. Such an effort should seek to strike a balance between improving survival and reducing straying of returning adults.

- 2) Trapping and hauling naturally produced Chinook at dams and weirs with bypass traps, to appropriate downstream locations before they are exposed to thermal stress.
- 3) Trapping and hauling of naturally produced Chinook that may become stranded in San Joaquin and Sacramento River tributaries due to low flows.
- 4) Placing trapped and hauled Chinook in acclimation net pens at downstream locations prior to final release
- 5) Trapping and hauling of naturally produced Chinook captured in high numbers at rotary screw traps that are currently deployed throughout the system.

Finally, there is precedent in California for the type of proactive effort we are calling for. We note the highly-successful joint settlement agreement (JSA) between the East Bay Municipal Utility District (EBMUD) and the resource agencies that is implemented on the Mokelumne River at Woodbridge. Similar efforts might be feasible at similar diversion structures such as the GCID diversion at Red Bluff on the Sacramento River where juvenile Chinook could also be trapped in a bypass and trucked downstream. Another good example of action to save salmon was the joint federal and state agency effort, that included fishery NGOs and the California Water Commission, beginning in 1991, establishing the Winter-Run Captive Broodstock Program to prevent the extinction of this unique run of Pacific salmon.

Your immediate action to bring together the responsible agencies, fishing community leaders and independent scientists is critical to concentrate the knowledge and expertise of those who are capable and authorized to modify and/or implement existing protocols to meet the challenges at hand. By being proactive, we have a better chance of protecting the resource as many of us are prescribed to do by the federal and state Endangered Species Acts, state and federal salmon doubling requirements, and a project purpose of the Central Valley Project.

The actions we envision are for critically dry conditions only, such as those we're now suffering. Emergency actions to save salmon during the course of this drought are not intended to substitute for flows and temperatures needed by salmon.

Thank you for considering this request to immediately convene a drought plan to save California Central Valley salmon populations. Time is of the essence.

Bill Jennings, Executive Director
California Sportfishing Protection Alliance



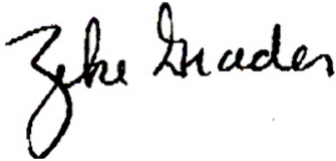
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27 January 2014
Page 5

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