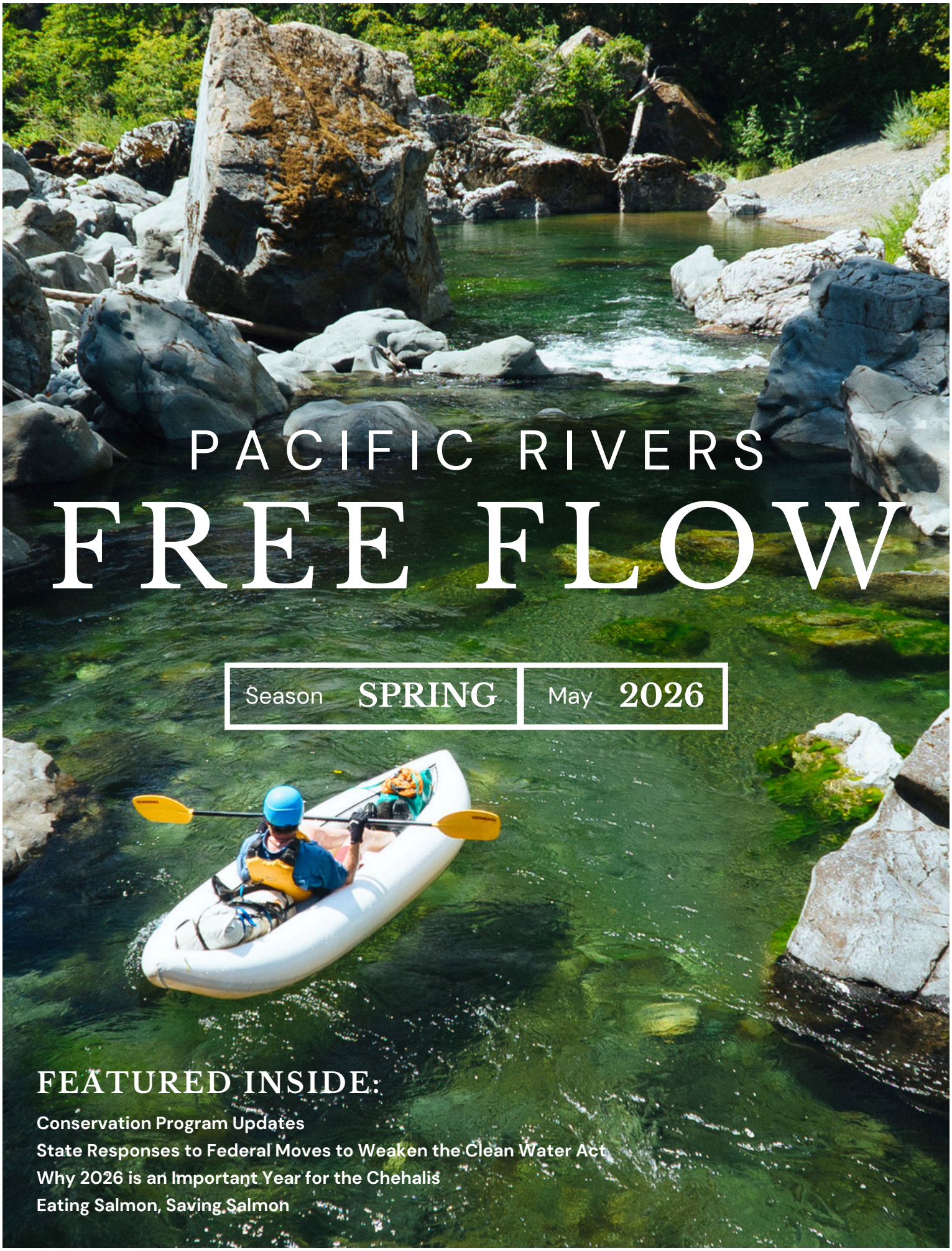


PACIFIC RIVERS

FREE FLOW

Season SPRING | May 2026

FEATURED INSIDE:

Conservation Program Updates
State Responses to Federal Moves to Weaken the Clean Water Act
Why 2026 is an Important Year for the Chehalis
Eating Salmon, Saving Salmon

Table of Contents

Letter from the Board Chair 3

Conservation Program Updates

North Umpqua River 6

Outstanding Resource Waters 7

Spring Chinook 10

Hells Canyon Water Quality 11

Watershed Education & Advocacy 13

Dam Removal & Prevention 14

The Clean Water Act Playing Field is Shifting 15

2026: A Defining Year for the Chehalis River 18

Eating Salmon, Saving Salmon 23

Dr. Charley Dewberry &
the Watershed Way of Thinking 26



Cover: Kayaker on the Chetco River. Photo by Zachary Collier / Northwest Rafting Co.



Overhead photo of the John Day River, courtesy of Bureau of Land Management OR & WA.

Letter From the Chair



Mike Morrison - Board Chair

I am pleased to have the opportunity to introduce you to Pacific Rivers' Spring 2026 edition of *Free Flow*. It is also our first opportunity to thank all of you for the support for our work in 2025. We are most grateful for your generosity, which allowed us to meet our conservation goals and continue to build our organization's strength once again last year. We believe that the confidence you have shown in us confers on us a measure of additional responsibility to pursue our mission. As you will read in this edition of *Free Flow*, we are embracing that responsibility and have set our sights on accomplishing even more this year.

This issue of *Free Flow* includes an update of our Conservation Program, which is a summary of the plan that the Board adopted at our first 2026 board meeting. I encourage you to take a good look at it.

To pick a few highlights, you will note that we will continue in 2026 to work toward bringing together stakeholders to achieve a comprehensive management plan for the Frank and Jeanne Moore Wild Steelhead Sanctuary. Among the data that will inform that work are the years of Steamboat and Canton Creek snorkel surveys for juvenile salmonids; we are pleased to be able to confirm that the series will continue this summer, and that we are working to make even more robust the inclusion of young folks as surveyors, providing them with valuable on-site conservation experience.

Pacific Rivers has also assumed the task of coordinating the North Umpqua Coalition, which was originally created in 2019 to educate the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission on the detrimental effects of the summer steelhead hatchery program. The Coalition's work resulted in the Commission ordering the end of that program. (Douglas County and others have challenged that determination in court, but as of this writing, the order remains in place.) The Coalition chose to remain in place to advocate for the North Umpqua basin, in general.

Anyone interested in the Moore Management Plan and snorkel surveys will enjoy Liz Gilliam's writing in gratitude of Dr. Charley Dewberry, our snorkel survey guru. I hope you will take from it not only Charley's huge contributions to Pacific Rivers over decades, but to river science writ large.

Our work to increase the number of Outstanding Resource Waters continues. This state-level Clean Water Act protection is even more important as Federal officials move to reduce environmental protections. I expect that anyone reading these words is familiar with the current federal-level assaults on protecting the natural world. We are seeing them here in the Northwest in many ways, some of them unexpected.

For example, we were surprised in mid-January by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission's release of a draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) for the proposed relicensing of the three massive dams on the Snake River in Hells Canyon. FERC provided an absurdly short 45 days for review and comment of the 1,300-page draft SEIS, which we and others found severely lacking or simply incorrect in many respects. We rose to the occasion by reviewing all the materials and submitting our comments in late February. We focused on the water quality section of the SEIS, emphasizing that the Snake's water quality problems in and below Hells Canyon can, and in fact must, be solved within 20 years. We continue to insist that the relicensing of the Hells Canyon Dams not proceed without technically and legally solid plans in place to assure that state water quality standards, including those for temperature, dissolved oxygen and methylmercury, will be met by 2045.

We are grateful to national Clean Water Act expert Gayle Killam for her contribution to this *Free Flow*. Gayle makes known in no uncertain terms the assault on environmental protections we are now facing, but provides some much-needed hope by way of explaining how states are now working to increase their influence over the health of their own waters. We are very appreciative of Gayle's article, and for her advice to us as we do what we can to meet the unprecedented challenges of these days.

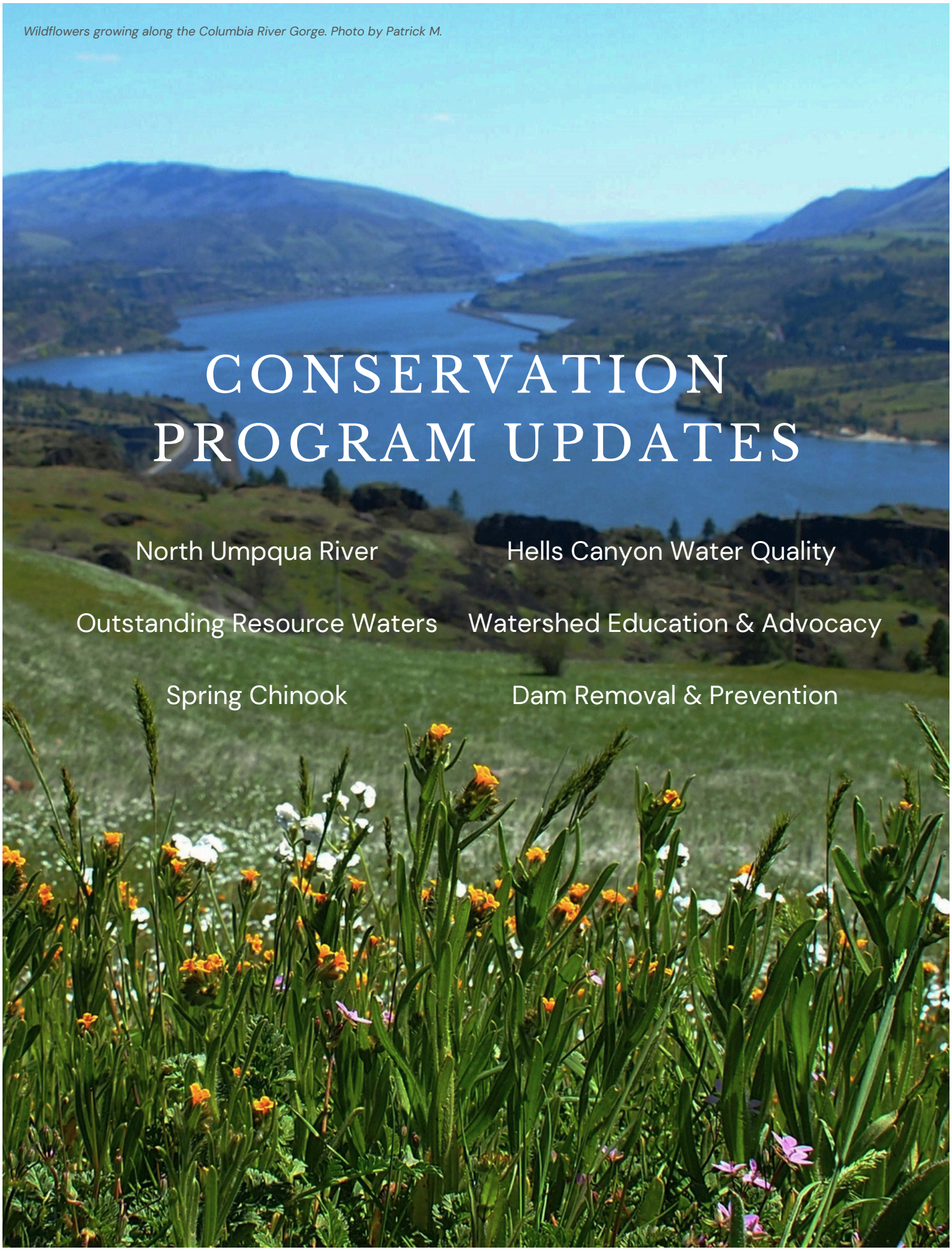
And now for some disappointing news: NOAA Fisheries has denied our ESA Petition regarding the spring Chinook salmon of the rivers of the Washington coast. Shortly before we received that news, the petitions for springers on the Oregon coast and the Northern California coast were also denied. We are in consultation with our partner Center for Biological Diversity to determine next steps. If anyone is interested in reading the decision, please let us know and we will make it available to you.

There are many, many reasons to work for the recovery of salmon, from their right to be here to how they contribute to the health of their watersheds' ecosystems. One of the reasons is highlighted in a personal story submitted by guest Laura Anderson of Local Ocean Seafoods – for many, salmon is an important food source. Laura's perspective is well worth considering.

Putting these newsletters together is a big task, but education is an important part of our mission, so we believe the product is worth the effort. We hope you agree. And again, our thanks for your support, which not only makes *Free Flow* possible, but, too, all of the work described in each and every issue.



Mike Morrison



Wildflowers growing along the Columbia River Gorge. Photo by Patrick M.

CONSERVATION PROGRAM UPDATES

North Umpqua River

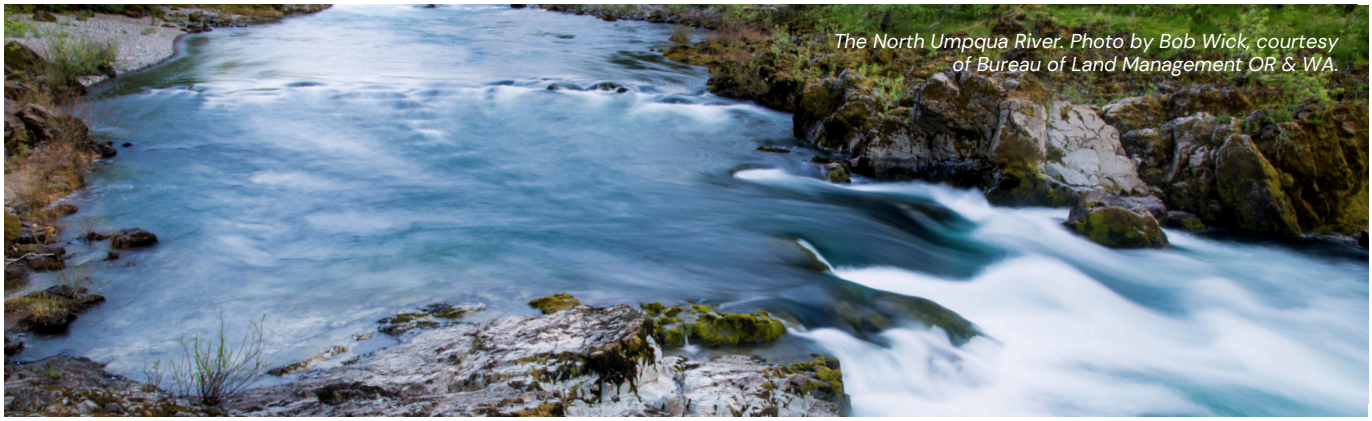
Hells Canyon Water Quality

Outstanding Resource Waters

Watershed Education & Advocacy

Spring Chinook

Dam Removal & Prevention



The North Umpqua River. Photo by Bob Wick, courtesy of Bureau of Land Management OR & WA.

North Umpqua River

Strategic Goal: A well protected and managed North Umpqua watershed that sustains robust populations of wild steelhead, salmon, lamprey and other native fish and wildlife, and serves as a model for the protection, restoration and management of other great rivers of the Northwest.

Interim (1-5 year) Goals:

1. Targeted projects in key North Umpqua tributary watersheds – particularly those of Steamboat and Canton Creeks – to improve water quality, reduce peak water temperatures, and remove barriers to fish passage.
2. A comprehensive watershed management plan that will protect and improve the water and habitat quality of Steamboat and Canton Creeks, thereby ensuring that all long-term goals for the Frank & Jeanne Moore Wild Steelhead Sanctuary, including those for steelhead and lamprey recovery, are met and sustained.
3. Elimination of the hatchery summer steelhead run that is impairing and threatening recovery of the North Umpqua's wild summer steelhead.
4. Steady progress toward wild steelhead recovery goals, confirmed by long-term monitoring of the status of wild steelhead populations.
5. Outstanding Resource Water designation of Steamboat Creek.

River conservation is a commitment, not an endpoint. Our long-term commitment is best exemplified by our past and continuing work on behalf of Oregon's famed North Umpqua River. Today we build on the achievements of Pacific Rivers over nearly four decades, including Wild and Scenic designation, promotion of comprehensive watershed planning, advocacy for key restoration projects, long-term surveys of juvenile salmonids in key tributaries, and dedication of the Frank and Jeanne Moore Wild Steelhead Sanctuary on Steamboat Creek in 2019.

In 2025, in continued pursuit of our long-term strategic goal, we made progress toward each of our North Umpqua interim goals. We:

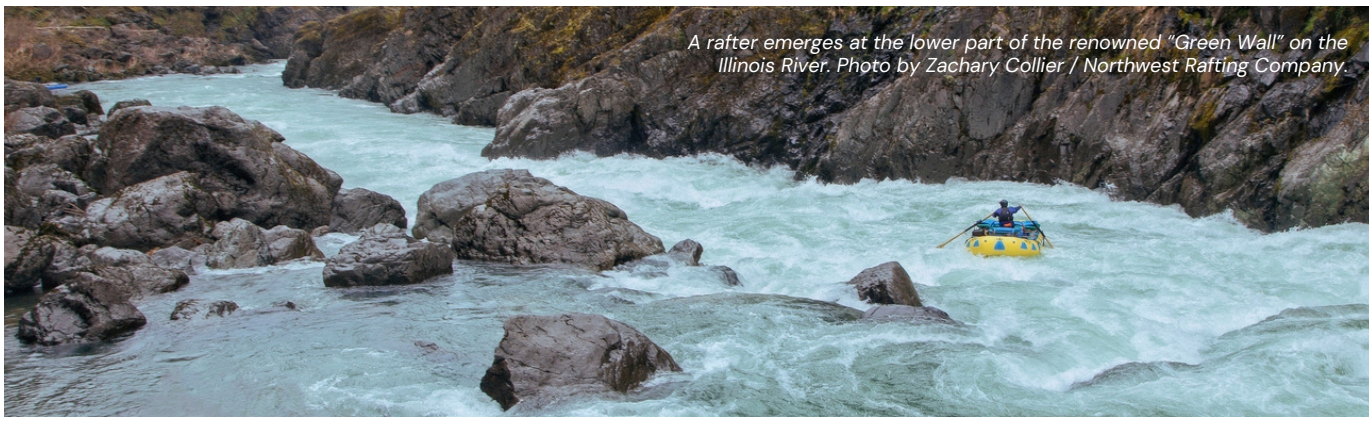
- Completed a detailed study of long-term stream temperature trends in key North Umpqua tributaries and published findings.
- Recommended next steps, including targeted stream restoration projects and long-term temperature monitoring.
- Promoted our vision for coordinated planning and management of Steamboat Creek by agencies, organizations and tribes with varied responsibilities, expertise and interests in the watershed.
- Continued our advocacy for Outstanding Resource Water classification of Steamboat Creek.
- Accepted responsibility for coordination of the North Umpqua Coalition.

In 2025, working with our North Umpqua Coalition partners, we also:

- Advocated for the removal of Winchester Dam to address serious safety, habitat, temperature and pollution issues associated with it.
- Supported ODFW's plan to eliminate hatchery steelhead releases in order to protect and restore the North Umpqua's legendary wild steelhead runs.
- Produced a documentary film to highlight ongoing stream restoration projects in the Pass Creek watershed, building on work in recent decades to reverse damages from unbridled prior clear-cut logging in the watershed.

In 2026, we will:

- Raise the remaining needed funds and conduct summer snorkel surveys to document numbers and trends of juvenile salmonids in Steamboat and Canton Creeks.
- Expand youth engagement in the snorkel surveys by developing ways for the students to share their experiences with us and their family and communities.
- Expand the assessment of Steamboat Creek to include analyses of environmental variables (i.e., land use and wildfire impacts) and biological variables (aka the snorkel survey data of juvenile distribution and abundance) and relate these to the stream temperature trends. This will support watershed management, monitoring, restoration, and conservation priorities.
- Develop a partnership of resource managers to form a Steamboat Stewardship Coalition. Start the conversation with the relevant agencies and people to encourage working together for a shared vision, and eventually (aiming for 2027) develop a 'coordinated management framework'.
- Raise funds needed to develop a GIS database of abundance and distribution of juvenile fish from all years of snorkel surveys.



A rafter emerges at the lower part of the renowned "Green Wall" on the Illinois River. Photo by Zachary Collier / Northwest Rafting Company.

Outstanding Resource Waters

Strategic Goal: Protection of the water quality and aquatic ecosystems of the Northwest's most outstanding rivers through state classifications as Outstanding Resource Waters.

Interim (1-3 years) Goals:

1. Secure ORW classification by ODEQ of the Illinois River (Rogue River Basin), Rough and Ready Creek (Illinois River Basin), and Steamboat Creek (North Umpqua Basin).
2. Initiate and/or engage directly in 2-3 other particularly important and promising campaigns in the Northwest.
3. Become a center for information, training and support for organizations, communities and tribes pursuing specific ORW designations.

Under the Clean Water Act, states and designated tribes have the authority to establish water quality standards. "Outstanding Resource Waters" – their cleanest and most ecologically significant waters – are to be given the highest "non-degradation" standard. Many states across the country have designated Outstanding Resource Waters over the decades, but until recently the Northwest had none. Now six have been designated in Oregon and Washington, and there is momentum for more.

In early 2024, Pacific Rivers and coalition partners American Rivers, the Pew Charitable Trusts, and Trout Unlimited petitioned for Oregon ORW designation of Steamboat Creek, the critically important tributary of the North Umpqua River for wild steelhead. Soon after, conservation groups in southwest Oregon petitioned for designation of the Illinois River and its important tributary, Rough and Ready Creek. Pacific Rivers strongly supports those designations as well.

In late 2024, the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality included designation of all three in its draft three-year work plan. In 2025, ODEQ finalized its three-year workplan. It included rulemaking for the Illinois and Rough and Ready, beginning in 2026, but postponed action on Steamboat Creek.

2025 Accomplishments:

- Supported inclusion of ORW rulemaking for Rough and Ready Creek and the Illinois River in ODEQ's Triennial workplan.
- Began work to build support for action on our Steamboat Creek ORW petition soon.

Proposed Outstanding Resource Waters



Photo by Barbara Ullian.

Illinois River

The National Wild and Scenic Illinois River, its tributaries and associated wetlands from Forest Service boundary down to Nancy Creek, excluding Deer Creek (46.6 miles).

A little-known gem of southwestern Oregon, the Illinois River is a critically important tributary of the renowned Rogue River. Its watershed comprises about one-fifth of the entire Rogue Basin. It contributes approximately 25 percent of the Rogue's total flow and supports its world-class fishery. However, the Illinois is significant in its own right. In 1984, Congress designated 50.4 miles as a National Wild and Scenic River owing to its nationally outstanding water quality, fisheries, scenery, recreation, and botanical values.

The National Wild and Scenic reach (46.6 miles) that is now nominated as an Outstanding Resource Water lies primarily within rugged canyons of the Kalmiopsis Wilderness and National Forest roadless areas. It includes direct tributaries and associated wetlands, which provide ample, cool, clean water that is essential for the river's unique plant life and aquatic life, including salmon, steelhead, and other migratory fish. The lower Illinois also provides crucial thermal refuge for salmon and steelhead of the Rogue.

The Illinois River's brilliant clear water offers scenic beauty and outstanding recreational opportunities, including swimming, rafting, hiking, and camping. These water-quality dependent values—the very ones for which the river was designated Wild and Scenic— are vital for the region's economy and need to be protected into the future.

Nomination letter:
oregon.gov/deq/wq/Documents/trIllinoisORWnom.pdf

2026 Priorities:

- During the upcoming public comment period, build broad support for the Illinois River and Rough and Ready Creek's classification as Oregon Outstanding Resource Waters.
- Promote and publicize other current ORW initiatives in the Northwest.
- Begin building the case for ORW consideration for other Northwest waters.
- Raise funds for expansion of our ORW work going forward.



Kalmiopsis leachiana on the Illinois River. Photo by Zachary Collier / Northwest Rafting Company.

"I was in the lead where I usually walk...when suddenly I beheld a small patch of beautiful low-growing deep rose colored plants and because of its beauty I started running toward it and dropped to my knees...I had never seen anything so beautiful before."

— Lilla Leach, a pioneering botanist on her discovery in 1930 of the endemic Kalmiopsis leachiana, the oldest living member of the azalea and rhododendron family.



Photo by Barbara Ullian.

Rough & Ready Creek

Rough and Ready Creek, a tributary of the West Fork Illinois River, flows from the Kalmiopsis Wilderness, through Oregon's second largest National Forest Roadless Area, and then in broad sweeping bends and multiple channels, out onto a broad ancient floodplain where there's a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Area of Critical Concern (ACEC), a State of Oregon Botanical Wayside, and a U.S. Forest Service Botanical Area. In the headwaters of the South Fork of Rough and Ready Creek is a rare plant association of western hemlock, Port Orford cedar and the endemic Sadler's oak.

According to the BLM's Areas of Critical Environmental Concern Management Plan, "Rough and Ready Creek is a unique fluvial system characterized by exceptional water quality and clarity, very flashy flows, an unusual braided stream channel and a broad, relatively undisturbed alluvium of large rounded cobbles."

In its lower reaches, Rough and Ready Creek is a "losing" stream system that has a strong influence on groundwater and what is thought to be an extensive hyporheic zone. In its upper reaches, where it's a "gaining" system, groundwater in the form of perennial springs and other inputs maintain late season flows and provide cool water refugia for native fish and other aquatic species. The presence of the insectivorous Cobra lily (Darlingtonia californica) and other rare and endemic wetlands plants, requiring a consistent flow of water, indicate the presence of perennial springs along stream banks, in the uplands and in small headwaters tributaries.

The federal public lands of Rough and Ready Creek's mostly intact flood plain also serve as a community open space and outdoor classroom.

Rough and Ready Creek has been recognized by the U.S. Forest Service for its excellent year-round water quality; it remains exceptionally clear during winter storms that turn other creeks muddy.

The clarity of Rough and Ready Creek's water also contributes substantially to the scenic value of the watershed. Both the clear water and warmer summer water temperatures attract local swimmers to the lower reaches of Rough and Ready Creek and enhance local recreation use.

Nomination letter:
oregon.gov/deq/wq/Documents/trRoughReadyORWnom.pdf



Leaping springer, photo by Shane Anderson.

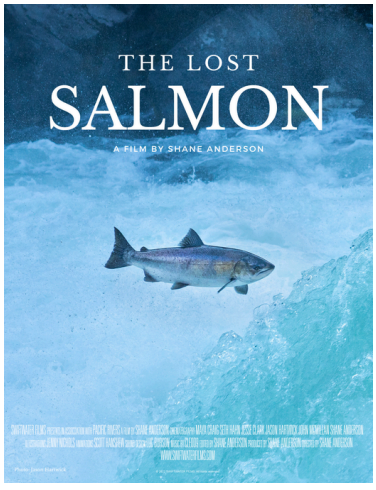
Spring Chinook

Strategic Goal: Abundant, self-sustaining populations of wild spring Chinook salmon that preserve their cultural, spiritual, ecological and economic value for future generations.

Interim (1-5 years) Goals:

1. Habitat improvements, including dam removals where necessary, are slated, funded, and underway.
2. Clear recovery goals – sufficient to ensure self-sustaining, harvestable populations that at a minimum meet all treaty obligations – are established for all "springer" rivers in Washington, Oregon, California and Idaho.
3. Measurable increases in runs of wild springers are seen across the region.

Recent genetic research has confirmed that spring-run Chinook are distinct from fall-run salmon. They evolved over millions of years to fill different ecological niches and utilize different habitats in time and space. Entering fresh water early in the year when river flows are high, they are able to reach and spawn in areas that fall-run fish cannot.



But spring Chinook are imperiled today. Dams, diversions, and habitat degradation have made their long journeys difficult or impossible. We have already lost them in some watersheds, and we are in danger of losing them in many more soon. (See the Emmy award-winning documentary "The Lost Salmon" by Shane Anderson on our website for more on the plight of springers and the urgent work to save them.)

We are working along multiple lines to recover "springers" in the Northwest. We promote public awareness of their importance and plight. With an emphasis on key springer watersheds, we advocate floodplain restoration, watershed protection, water quality improvements, and dam removals, as well as prevention of a proposed new dam on the Chehalis River. We have also been working to secure listing of currently unprotected runs of spring Chinook as endangered species, as a way to garner policies and funding urgently needed to accelerate restoration and recovery projects.

In spring of 2023, with the Center for Biological Diversity, we finalized and submitted to the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) a petition for Endangered Species Act listing of the "springers" of the rivers of the Washington Coast, which are among the most imperiled of all Northwest populations. Our petition included detailed information supporting the listing, including the latest genetic evidence that springers are distinct from other Chinook salmon. Our petition bolstered the case for other pending ESA petitions for coastal springers in Oregon and California.

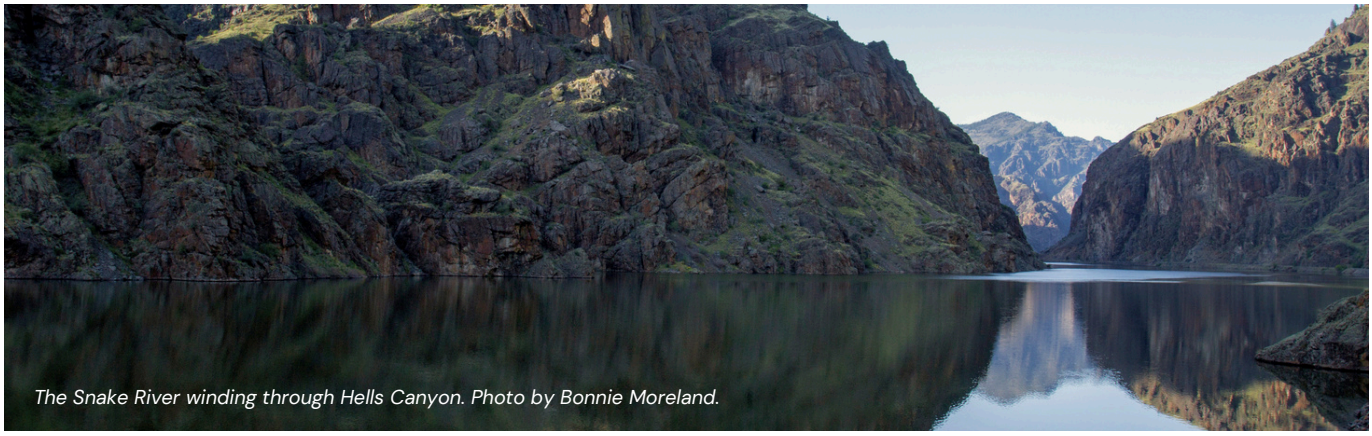
Late in 2025, NMFS declined the pending petitions for the Oregon and California Coast springers. In February, NMFS then denied our petition for Washington Coast springers. With our partners at the Center for Biological Diversity, we are considering next steps on this front.

In any case, we will redouble our efforts this year to protect springers around the Northwest.

2026 Priorities:

- Work for removal of dams hindering springer migrations, including the four Lower Snake River Dams.
- Work for protection of key springer spawning tributaries in river basins such as the Klamath where dam removals have now taken place.
- Prevent construction of a massive new dam on the Chehalis River. (See "2026: A Defining Year for the Chehalis River" by Liz Gilliam, p. 18.)
- Promote and help secure funding for floodplain, riparian and in-stream habitat restoration work.
- Document progress (or lack thereof) toward recovery goals for Northwest springers and advocate for accelerated action.
- Continue to promote "The Lost Salmon" and other topical films and arrange screening events and discussions."

For more information, see the article "Spring Chinook Salmon: Their Watersheds, Rivers, People and Future" in the Fall 2023 issue of Free Flow (pacificrivers.org/newsletters).



The Snake River winding through Hells Canyon. Photo by Bonnie Moreland.

Hells Canyon Water Quality

Strategic Goal: Snake River fish in and downstream of Hells Canyon that are safe to eat.

Interim (1-3 years) Goals:

1. Update of the Snake River temperature Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (ODEQ) in 2026.
2. Completion of the predictive Snake River methylmercury management model by early 2027.
3. Adoption of a Snake River mercury TMDL and accompanying Water Quality Management Plan (WQMP) ODEQ in 2028.
4. Adoption and initiation of a comprehensive long-term monitoring program for mercury and related fish tissue and water quality parameters by 2028.

Our long-term work to address serious Snake River water quality problems in and downstream of Hells Canyon has entered a critical phase. We are still closely monitoring the scientific work led by the United States

Geological Survey (USGS) to develop a predictive methylmercury management model for the Snake River. It will be the basis for the development of the methylmercury TMDL we have called for since 2019. (To learn more, see "Making Hells Canyon Fish Safe For All To Eat: Problems, Solutions & Next Steps" in the Fall 2025 issue of *Free Flow*.)

This year, we will also be involved in two very important related processes. The first is the revision of the Snake River Temperature TMDL and WQMP by ODEQ. Snake River temperatures regularly exceed state standards for the protection of fish. There are multiple sources of the problem, including the three Hells Canyon reservoirs, municipal and industrial discharges, and loss of riparian vegetation on tributaries. As the climate continues to warm, it is more important than ever to address other contributors to the Snake's thermal loads.

Excessive water temperatures cause or contribute to other serious problems for the Snake. In combination with the river's excessive nutrient loads, they create extreme algae blooms, which in turn cause instream oxygen levels to fall well below state standards. These upstream problems are then compounded by the presence of the reservoirs behind the three massive dams of the Hells Canyon Complex, which stratify distinctly in summer and result in anoxic (virtually oxygen-free) conditions deep in the reservoirs for months each year. In those conditions, tremendous amounts of highly toxic methylmercury form in the depths, and remain trapped there until stratification breaks down in fall. Then it is released into the food chain, poisoning fish, other aquatic life, and the birds and mammals of Hells Canyon that eat them.



Algal bloom in Brownlee Reservoir. Courtesy of Lorraine Backer / Centers for Disease Control and Prevention public health image library.

Recipe for extreme mercury toxicity:

Impoundment + excessive organics + excessive nutrients + heat =
extreme eutrophication

Then mercury + stratification + hypoxia (volume + duration) + turnover + bioaccumulation =
extremely serious methylmercury problems

Together, the development of the Temperature and Mercury TMDLs and WQMPs are the necessary steps toward solving the Snake's interrelated water quality problems. We will be directly involved in both. This year, we will also contribute to the public review of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission's draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement on the proposed renewal of the operating license for the three Hells Canyon Complex dams. The conditions placed on that license must include the requirements of the temperature and mercury TMDLs and WQMPs.

2025 Accomplishments:

- Closely monitored USGS scientific work on Snake River mercury issues.
- Published updates in *Free Flow*, including summaries of what has been learned about Snake water quality problems in the last decade and the solutions we advocate today.

2026 Priorities:

- Comment on the draft FERC SEIS, with an emphasis on its water quality requirements.
- Participate directly in the Temperature TMDL rulemaking process.
- Monitor the USGS methylmercury studies and development of the predictive mercury model for the Snake River above, in, and downstream of the three Hells Canyon Reservoirs.
- Prepare to participate directly in the Mercury TMDL rulemaking process.



Photo from the Salmon Life Cycle in August 2025, by Nick Basaraba.

Watershed Education & Advocacy

Strategic Goal: Widespread understanding of, support for and application of sound policies and proven practices for watershed-based protection and restoration of rivers, streams, wetlands and estuaries.

Most river conservation issues are complex. Effective conservation and restoration work requires a deep understanding of them. It also requires broad public support.

Through our biannual journal *Free Flow*, we serve the Northwest conservation community by digging deep into the most important river issues of the day. Recent articles have provided in-depth looks at impacts of fire on watersheds and drinking water sources; genetic differences between spring- and fall-run salmon; the vast potential for improving river health through floodplain restoration in the Northwest; the value of beavers in restoration and maintenance of floodplains; the similarities and differences among recovery of river ecosystems in the years and decades after dam removals; and the complex story of how toxic methylmercury forms and moves through the food chain in rivers and reservoirs.

Deep understanding of river issues is essential, but it is insufficient in and of itself to address them effectively. That is why we also provide readers of *Free Flow* with information about the ways we are working to protect and restore rivers and watersheds and ways they can do so too. Recent articles have highlighted how to designate more Northwest rivers as Outstanding Resource Waters; to secure protection of more distinct species and populations of salmon; to use the Clean Water Act's provisions to establish pollution limits and drive watershed clean-up plans; to seek local, state and federal funding to pick up the pace of floodplain restoration; and much more.

2025 Accomplishments:

- Drafted a long-term strategic plan for the Watershed Education & Advocacy program.
- Recruited expert guests to speak at Board meetings about topics relevant to our priorities.
- Expanded our use of email and social media to facilitate access to information on river health topics and ways to get involved.
- Updated our website, including the Take Action page.
- Published two expanded editions of *Free Flow*, with in-depth articles on topics of regional importance.
- Organized a film screening of "The Grand Salmon" at the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry.
- Helped organize the annual "Salmon Life Cycle" community bike ride in downtown Portland and the "Salmon on Salmon Street" painting event.

- Hosted an outreach and education event in Eugene.
- Worked with Aanchal Vidyarthi to draft online resources for Northwest watershed advocates working for state-level implementation of Clean Water Act programs.

2026 Priorities:

- Publish issues of *Free Flow* in May and October.
- Use social media to drive people to *Free Flow* articles and other information sources on our website.
- Host our own events and support partner events.
- Invite guest experts on river science and policy for regular presentations and discussions with our Board and staff.
- Update our Watershed Education and Advocacy strategic plan with mid-range projects that align with our strategic priorities, budget and capacity.



Advocates near the proposed Chehalis mega-dam site. Photo by Lee First

Dam Removal & Prevention

We continue to work in coalitions to prevent construction of new dams and to accelerate removal of the most harmful ones in our region. Our current priorities for removal are the four dams on the Lower Snake River in Washington, Winchester Dam on the North Umpqua River in Oregon, and the Eel River dams in Northern California. Our current priority for prevention is the proposed new dam on the Chehalis River.



For more information on these rivers and dams, visit our website to see:

Chehalis River Film – "Chehalis: A Watershed Moment" (pacificrivers.org/films)

Eel River Film – "A River's Last Chance" (pacificrivers.org/films)

Series of Articles in Spring 2024 *Free Flow* – "Northwest Dam Removals: Past, Present and Future" (pacificrivers.org/newsletters)

The Clean Water Act Playing Field is Shifting



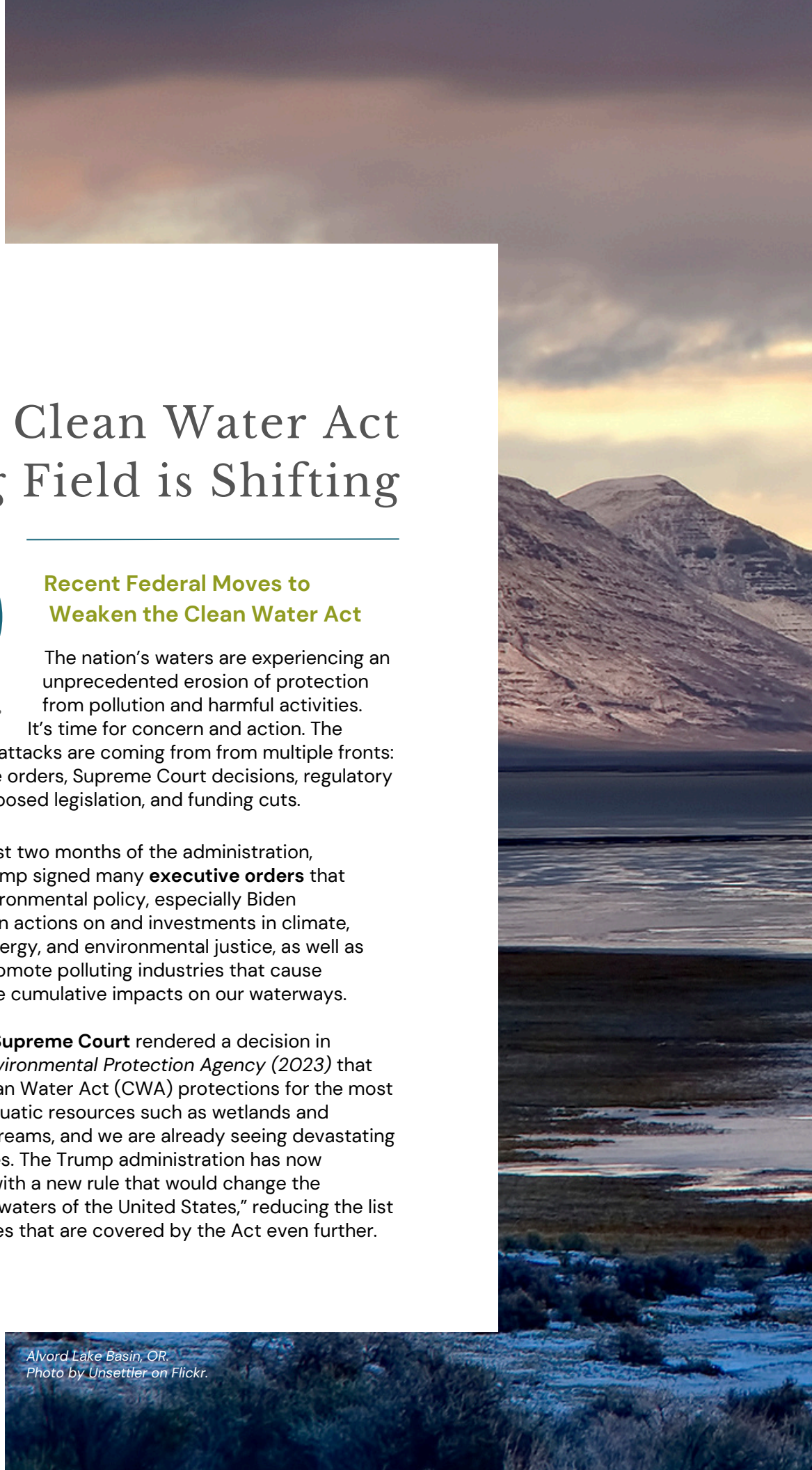
Gayle Killam, Principal
Water Policy Pathways

Recent Federal Moves to Weaken the Clean Water Act

The nation's waters are experiencing an unprecedented erosion of protection from pollution and harmful activities. It's time for concern and action. The attacks are coming from from multiple fronts: executive orders, Supreme Court decisions, regulatory changes, proposed legislation, and funding cuts.

Within the first two months of the administration, President Trump signed many **executive orders** that targeted environmental policy, especially Biden administration actions on and investments in climate, renewable energy, and environmental justice, as well as some that promote polluting industries that cause immeasurable cumulative impacts on our waterways.

In 2023, the **Supreme Court** rendered a decision in *Sackett v. Environmental Protection Agency (2023)* that removed Clean Water Act (CWA) protections for the most vulnerable aquatic resources such as wetlands and ephemeral streams, and we are already seeing devastating consequences. The Trump administration has now followed up with a new rule that would change the definition of "waters of the United States," reducing the list of waterbodies that are covered by the Act even further.



Alvord Lake Basin, OR.
Photo by Unsettler on Flickr.



Wood River, OR. Wetland areas are crucial aquatic ecosystems – home to numerous key plant and animal species – and many like these are now more vulnerable to recent federal actions weakening the Clean Water Act.

Photo by Greg Shine, courtesy of Bureau of Land Management OR & WA.

The CWA grants states and authorized Tribes the authority to review federal permits and licenses (called water quality certification and CWA Section 401) to ensure that activities will not harm waters in their jurisdiction. The first Trump administration weakened the **regulations** that govern these protections, and they were restored and strengthened during the Biden administration. These authorities are once again threatened by proposed changes to CWA Section 401 regulations.

At the end of 2025, the U.S. House passed a piece of **legislation** called the PERMIT Act that, if passed by the Senate and signed by the President, would greatly weaken the Clean Water Act. The PERMIT (Promoting Efficient Review for Modern Infrastructure Today) Act has several parts that separately attack the authorities of states and Tribes to review projects, limit EPA's ability to veto damaging projects, and allow EPA and the Army Corps of Engineers to exclude whole categories of aquatic resources, such as small streams and wetlands, from Clean Water Act protections.

States Making Moves to Fill Gaps

Some states are developing new permitting programs to address the uncertainty associated with reduction in Clean Water Act protections. Notable examples include **Colorado**'s passage of a bill and adoption of regulations that create a state-run dredge and fill permitting program. This program would kick in for projects such as residential or commercial construction, bridge building, dock reconstruction, road maintenance and construction, and any stream crossings that dig up or deposit materials in wetlands and streams that are no longer protected by the CWA.



Comanche Point at the confluence of the Rio Costilla and Comanche Creek. These rivers are at risk of not being protected by the Clean Water Act because the Rio Costilla dries up before it reaches the Rio Grande.

Photo by Jim O'Donnell, courtesy of Amigos Bravos.

Tackling even a bigger task, **New Mexico** has passed legislation and is in the midst of a rulemaking process to develop three state permitting programs: one that is similar to Colorado for dredge and fill activities and another that permits all pollution from pipes, ditches, and similar conveyances into waters that have lost CWA protections. In addition, New Mexico (one of only 3 states for which EPA still writes its pollution permits) is also creating a program to take over that permitting from the EPA for the waters that are still covered by the CWA.

California implements state dredge and fill procedures that are based on a "no net loss" of wetlands and waterways





"Dredging" involves removal of mud and sediment from a riverbed and "filling" it into another area, often done as part of road or building construction in wetland areas.

Left: Photo by Geof Sheppard.

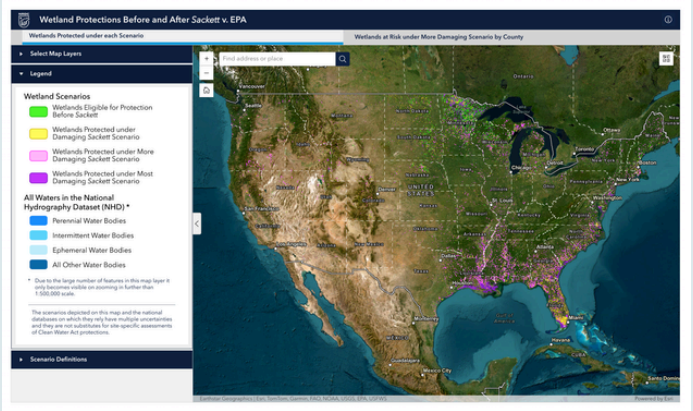
Right: Photo courtesy of U.S. Army Corps.

policy. The California program applies to all state waters, including some that are no longer protected by the Clean Water Act because of the narrowing of the definition of waters of the U.S.

In the Pacific Northwest, we have two examples of non-federal permitting programs at different stages. **Oregon** already has its own removal-fill law that was established before the Clean Water Act and applies to additional waters beyond the waters of the U.S. The state coordinates with the Army Corps through a joint permit application to issue the federal and state permits when they are both required.

Washington state is transitioning an existing authorization process for altering state waters to a permitting program with public notice and participation in order to address lost protections. Pacific Rivers worked with partners to provide comments to the Washington Department of Ecology before the release of the draft rules. Important topics being considered include which waters will be protected by the rules, which activities will be exempted, and how the public will be allowed to engage. We will fill you in on more details as we have them.

For now, the main defense is at the state level, and the Pacific Northwest is preparing for continued threats to our water resources.

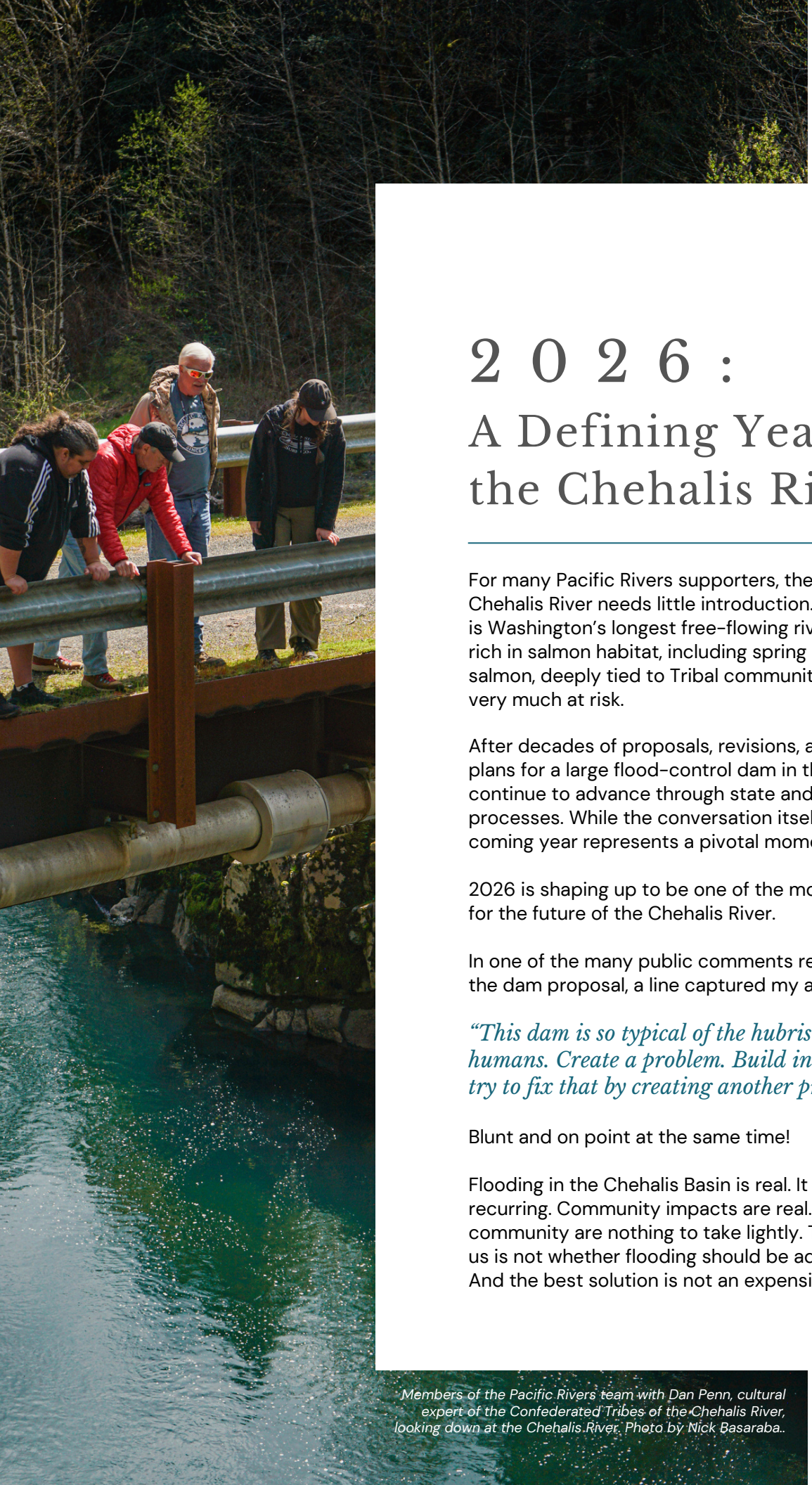


For more information on how your water resources are affected:

The Natural Resources Defense Council: Mapping Destruction (nrdc.org/resources/mapping-destruction)

- Report: *Mapping Destruction: Using GIS Modeling to Show the Disastrous Impacts of Sackett v. EPA on America's Wetlands*
- Interactive Map: Wetland Protections Before & After *Sackett v. EPA*

Sackett v. Environmental Protection Agency, 598 U.S. 651 (2023) (supremecourt.gov/opinions/22pdf/21-454_4g15.pdf)



2026:
A Defining Year for the Chehalis River



Liz Gilliam - Conservation Program Manager

For many Pacific Rivers supporters, the Chehalis River needs little introduction. It is Washington's longest free-flowing river – rich in salmon habitat, including spring Chinook salmon, deeply tied to Tribal communities, and very much at risk.

After decades of proposals, revisions, and debate, plans for a large flood-control dam in the Chehalis Basin continue to advance through state and federal review processes. While the conversation itself is not new, the coming year represents a pivotal moment.

2026 is shaping up to be one of the most important years for the future of the Chehalis River.

In one of the many public comments recently submitted on the dam proposal, a line captured my attention:

"This dam is so typical of the hubris and arrogance of humans. Create a problem. Build in a floodplain, then try to fix that by creating another problem."

Blunt and on point at the same time!

Flooding in the Chehalis Basin is real. It is expensive, and recurring. Community impacts are real. Threats to safety and community are nothing to take lightly. The question before us is not whether flooding should be addressed. It is how. And the best solution is not an expensive mega-dam.

Members of the Pacific Rivers team with Dan Penn, cultural expert of the Confederated Tribes of the Chehalis River, looking down at the Chehalis River. Photo by Nick Basaraba..



Floodwaters near the Burlington Northern Depot, Chehalis. Courtesy of Lewis County Historical Museum.



Flooding in Chehalis area when water broke through a dyke after heavy rains and snow melts in 2007. Photo by Dean H.

For generations, development has expanded into flood-prone landscapes, transforming natural river behavior into a costly societal problem. There is documentation of flooding in the floodplain of the Chehalis as early as there are records (Wikipedia – "Flood History in the Chehalis River"). For example, federal funding was being spent on the prospect of a proposed dam all the way back in 1934. In the 1950s, the upper Chehalis Basin Project was proposed to build a storage dam and deepen the river corridor. Flood control measures, including levees, dams, and relocations, were repeatedly proposed and rejected between the 1960s and into the 1980s. Yet deforestation and development in the floodplain have continued, while not enough has been done to reduce risk to the community.

What's Happening in 2026

Several major decisions will be made this year:



Overview of watershed restoration and flood reduction activities. Courtesy of Washington Department of Ecology.

- At the federal level, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is anticipated to release its Revised Draft Environmental Impact Statement (RDEIS) this spring. This document will evaluate the dam proposal under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and will trigger another critical public review and comment period.
- At the state level, the Department of Ecology will file its final EIS for the dam proposal. The public comment period just wrapped for the State's DEIS, with over 1,000 comments being submitted from the community. From what we have been able to review on the comment page, the overwhelming majority are opposed to the dam. The Final EIS is proposed in August 2026.
- Washington agencies continue advancing basin planning efforts and policy analyses that will help shape long-term flood-risk management strategies. The Chehalis Basin board is planning to decide its long-term strategy by this fall. Taking the state and federal review processes in consideration, as well as expert opinion, the decision will be made to include a proposal to address flooding that includes the dam, or not, whether and what to include in the Local Actions Non-Dam Alternative (LAND) proposal, as well as planning, zone changes, etc.

These are decision-shaping events that influence how impacts are understood, how alternatives are evaluated, and ultimately, whether and what projects move forward for the long-term.

What We Can Do

Pacific Rivers remains deeply engaged in this process.

Over the past year, our work has focused on bringing technical and watershed perspectives into a discussion that is often framed in simplified idealist (engineering) terms. Rivers are dynamic, interconnected systems, and large infrastructure decisions carry long-term physical consequences.



In April 2024, Pacific Rivers met with Dan Penn, a cultural expert of the Confederated Tribes of the Chehalis River, to visit the area surrounding the proposed dam site. This area hosts abundant wildlife and holds deep importance to local Tribes. Photo by Nick Basaraba.

Our efforts have included:

- Preparing detailed technical comments on environmental review document
- Evaluating hydrologic and geomorphic assumptions
- Raising concerns about unresolved scientific uncertainties
- Engaging with agencies, partners and allied organizations
- Supporting public understanding of river processes, tradeoffs, and long-term implications

Our goal is to ensure that decisions of this magnitude are grounded in sound science, cultural sensitivity, and long-term watershed thinking.

Key Concerns – A Brief Reminder

While the dam is being presented as a solution to flooding, several key concerns are too substantial to ignore.



In December 2025, Western Washington experienced major atmospheric river events. Flooded structures in the Chehalis floodplain, photo by U.S. Army Corp of Engineers.

Flooding Will Persist

Under current operating assumptions, the dam would primarily function during rare, extreme flood events driven by atmospheric rivers hitting the Willapa Hills – with limited prevention effects. More frequent floods that repeatedly disrupt homes, farms, local roads, and Interstate 5, like those in December 2025, would still occur. No single structure can eliminate flooding in this river system.

Extraordinary Financial Commitments

With projected construction costs estimated at $1.3 - $2.6 billion and substantial long-term operational expenses, the proposal represents one of the largest flood-control investments in the region's recent history.

Projects of this scale demand exceptional scrutiny. They lock in decades of fiscal obligations while altering watershed processes for generations that have unknown, significant additional costs. At this time, there is no confirmed entity willing to manage and maintain the dam. There is not even a clear understanding of where this amount of funding would come from to build it. Over the years, it has already cost the state of Washington $100 million just to explore the concept. There are better and more secure ways to invest.

Ecological & Cultural Impacts

The Chehalis Basin supports diverse aquatic ecosystems, including salmon populations already facing mounting pressures from habitat loss and climate change, and that Endangered southern resident orcas depend on. The operation of the 2,250ft (about 0.4 mile-wide) dam will likely lead to the functional extirpation of spring-run Chinook salmon in the upper sub-basins due to water temperature degradation, passage mortality, and habitat disconnection and degradation. The dam sponsors suggest that the fish will have volitional access through the dam – but they will actually be navigating between 9 to 12-ft wide rectangular openings within a 320-ft long concrete structure.



The Chehalis Basin in Southwest Washington. Map courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

The proposal also carries direct implications for Tribal resources, treaty-protected rights, and culturally significant landscapes. These are central, not secondary, considerations. The Confederated Tribes of the Chehalis Reservation and the Quinault Indian Nation have stated that the revised dam design and mitigation approach remain insufficient to protect treaty-reserved rights and sovereign resources.





The Chehalis is one of the last remaining unobstructed rivers in Southwest Washington and, as such, is critical spawning habitat for salmon runs. Left: Spring Chinook salmon of the free-flowing Chehalis River. Photo by Shane Anderson. Right: Female salmon lay their eggs in gravel "redds," or nests, not far from the site of the proposed mega-dam. Photo by Nick Basaraba.

Unresolved Sediment, Hyporheic & Geomorphic Uncertainty

Rivers transport not only water, but sediment — the gravel, sand, and finer materials that build floodplains, shape channels, and sustain habitat. Large dams fundamentally disrupt this balance by trapping sediment that would otherwise replenish downstream reaches.

These changes influence channel stability, erosion patterns, floodplain function, and habitat formation. Yet sediment processes remain one of the least well-resolved components of the current analyses. Without robust basin-scale understanding of sediment transport and long-term geomorphic response, projected outcomes carry substantial uncertainty.

This is not an academic detail. It is a defining element of river behavior and is a commonly overlooked, under-studied and expensive impact in other river projects in the region (i.e. culverts, dams, floodwalls, etc.).

There Are Better Options

The money spent to date on the flood-retention expandable project (already approximately $100 million in state dollars) could have been utilized to reduce flood damage in the Chehalis Basin. For example, those same funds could have already resulted in the following benefits had they not been spent pursuing this dam:



Kayakers enjoying the free-flowing Chehalis River in March of this year. Photo by Nick Boguslaw.

- For properties that experience less than one foot of flooding: 5,000 homes or 3,300 commercial / agricultural properties could have been floodproofed (per structure cost from Office of Chehalis Basin, 2025), or
- For properties that experience 1-5 feet of flooding: 660 valuable structures could have been elevated (per structure cost from Office of Chehalis Basin, 2025), or
- For properties that experience more than 5 feet of flooding: 250 valuable structures could have been acquired (per structure cost from Office of Chehalis Basin, 2025), or
- The entire length of the Local Actions Non-Dam Alternative (LAND) North Skookumchuck levee or approximately half of the South Skookumchuck levee could have been constructed using the high-end cost estimate (Moffat & Nichol, 2025), or
- Some combinations of the above could have been implemented.

This means that for the at-least $1 billion proposed to be spent on actually building the dam, ten times that much could be spent on the alternatives. The dam proposal has wasted, and will continue to waste, invaluable time, resources and massive amounts of money that could be spent instead on actions that would protect people, fish and wildlife.

Why This Year Matters

Major review documents, policy discussions, and basin planning decisions are converging. The scientific record continues to take shape. Public input remains influential. Most importantly, the direction set during this period may define the Chehalis Basin's management framework for decades.

In this era, with more knowledge and history behind us, we are bringing dams down, not building new ones. Attention is turning toward approaches that work with watershed processes — floodplain reconnection, strategic relocation, land-use planning, reforestation and distributed mitigation strategies. These solutions do not eliminate floods, because floods are natural. But they often reduce risk while preserving river function.

Pacific Rivers will remain actively involved throughout 2026 — providing technical analysis, advocating for rigorous science, informing our community and working to ensure that long-term watershed consequences are fully understood.

This year represents a critical moment. We believe there are better solutions that will increase ecosystem and community resilience in the face of climate change. Constructing a dam that diminishes the vitality of a river system and its inhabitants is not the answer. Integrated local floodplain management actions offer a solution that can be phased, adapted, and mutually beneficial for the Chehalis Basin's people and its salmon for generations to come. Let's work together for a better way forward.



Coho salmon in Lake Creek Falls.
Photo courtesy of Buerau of Land Management OR & WA.

Eating Salmon, Saving Salmon



Laura Anderson, Founder & CEO
Local Ocean Seafoods

In 2006, not long after opening Local Ocean Seafoods, I was asked to go to Washington, DC to testify before Congress. The issue was water allocation in the Sacramento River, the Klamath Basin, and the Columbia River system. Farmers, cities, dams, tribes, fishermen, and ecosystems were all competing for the same water. Salmon were losing.

My testimony was simple. I talked about my business. I talked about selling fish tacos. And I explained that thousands of businesses like mine — restaurants, processors, fishermen, distributors — depend on this resource. Salmon were not an abstract environmental issue. They were the foundation of real jobs, real meals, and real coastal economies.

I was in my mid-30s at the time, and I remember a few members of Congress coming up to me afterward to tell me how much they appreciated my testimony. I think part of what landed was that I didn't look like someone talking about a dying industry. I was a young business owner showing that this was still growing, still relevant, and still worth fighting for.

My core point then is still my core point now: eating salmon — wild, well-managed salmon — is one way we help keep salmon alive. This counterintuitive idea can make people uneasy. Salmon do not survive on existence value alone. They survive when people defend rivers, habitat, and management systems keeping them viable. Those fights are much easier to win when salmon have real economic value.



Local Ocean Fish Goddess Amber Morris and salmon troller Kurt Nichols.
Photo courtesy of Laura Anderson.

Salmon are not imaginary capital, like a number on a retirement statement. They are real natural capital. You can catch a salmon, sell it, buy it, cook it, and feed a family with it. That tangibility matters when decisions are being made about water, land use, and infrastructure.

On the West Coast, salmon are managed as mixed stocks and the strength of their runs varies widely. Fisheries managers protect vulnerable runs while allowing harvest of abundant ones through time, area, and gear restrictions. Increasingly, fishermen and scientists work together to improve this precision, using better data to avoid weak stocks and focus effort where it can be sustained.

This management is not perfect, but it is real, adaptive, and science-based. It is also fundamentally different from salmon farming. Farmed salmon is often presented as a substitute for wild salmon. It is not. Atlantic salmon — the species most farmed — are commercially extinct in their native rivers. Farming has replaced wild fish in the market, but it has not replaced the ecological role, cultural value, or river connection of Pacific salmon. Oregon has no salmon farms. Our state has made a deliberate choice to focus on wild harvest of healthy runs instead.

Not everyone has the time, equipment, money, or physical ability to catch their own fish. Many Pacific Rivers members do, and that connection is powerful. But most people experience salmon through a meal, not a fishing rod.

That is where commercial fishermen matter.



Amber Morris and longtime salmon troller Larry Davis.
Photo by Rachelle Hacmac.

Commercial fishers — both in the ocean and in rivers — are how salmon reaches millions of people. Without them, salmon risks becoming a privileged food, accessible only to those with the means and time to harvest harvest it themselves. Commercial fishers turn a shared natural resource into affordable, nutritious food for families, schools, restaurants, and communities far from the riverbank.

If we care about salmon as a food that feeds people — not just as a symbol — we have to care about the people who catch it for a living, and the management systems that allow them to do that responsibly. Protecting rivers while supporting commercial fisheries is not a contradiction. It is how salmon stays relevant in modern life. It is how salmon remains something people fight for, not just admire from a distance.

Twenty years after those days of opening a restaurant and testifying on the hill about the importance of fish tacos, my role has changed. It's no longer about running a successful restaurant. It's about helping pave the way for the next generation of entrepreneurs who want to work with — not against — natural systems. That means creating shared infrastructure like seafood hubs, building new markets, and strengthening supply chains so small businesses can survive and grow.

Buying local is power. It keeps value in communities. It supports working waterfronts. It creates reasons to protect rivers upstream and habitat downstream. But access matters too.

Wild king salmon is extraordinary, but it is not always accessible or affordable. That does not mean people are locked out of making good choices. Alaskan sockeye salmon is abundant, nutritious, widely available, and often far more affordable. It freezes exceptionally well, and recent research shows that frozen fish can be just as good as — and sometimes better than — fresh.



The famous Local Ocean grilled King Salmon dinner: Chinook salmon grilled medium-rare, roasted poblano pepper, Oregonzola cheese, pan-seared vegetables, linguini pasta, tomato saffron sauce.

Photo courtesy of Laura Anderson.

The point is not perfection. The point is participation.

When people choose wild salmon from well-managed fisheries — whether it's fresh off the dock or responsibly frozen — they reinforce the value of keeping rivers alive, water cold, and ecosystems functioning. That choice sends a signal that rivers are not just scenery. They are part of our food system.

We do, in fact, vote with our forks. And when we choose wisely, we help ensure that salmon — and the rivers they depend on — remain part of our future, not just our past.



A Coho salmon jumping during its fall migration to the upper reaches of Lake Creek Falls in Northwest Oregon.

Photo courtesy of Bureau of Land Management OR & WA.

DR. CHARLEY DEWBERRY

& the watershed way of thinking

WHY PROTECTING RIVERS MEANS THINKING BEYOND THE CHANNEL



Some people work on rivers. Others humbly change how we understand them. For Pacific Rivers, Charley Dewberry has always been one of those people and continues to educate us all.

Through the years, Charley has been a collaborator, a scientist, a teacher, and the steady force behind our snorkel survey program. He continues to help shape how many of us think about rivers — not as isolated channels, but as ecological systems connected to the watershed.

When Charley joined what was then Pacific Rivers Council in the early 1990s, the organization was already doing remarkable work. Pacific Rivers played an important role in advancing protections under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and was deeply engaged in the policy thinking that helped lead to the creation of watershed councils. These efforts reflected something that now feels obvious, but at the time was far from settled: protecting rivers requires looking beyond the river itself.

Even with PRC's major legislative wins, there was a growing recognition that something was missing. Wild and Scenic designation could prevent dams and certain types of development, but it didn't necessarily protect tributaries, headwaters, or the broader watershed. A segment of river could be "protected" on paper while still being impacted by everything happening upstream.



Charley with students from the Phoenix School participating in snorkel surveys of juvenile salmonids in Canton Creek in the summer of 2021.

That gap between policy and ecological reality is where Charley's work became so important.

By the 1990s, stream ecology was already a fairly well-developed science, with knowledge of how rivers respond to land use, disturbance, and changes across the watershed and how this affected stream ecology. Yet much of this knowledge had not made its way into policy or restoration strategies.

The founders of Pacific Rivers, Bob Doppelt and Rick George, along with Charley, helped change that.

With support from the National Science Foundation, Pacific Rivers convened fifteen leading stream ecologists in 1992 at the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest. The setting was modest — a windowless conference room — but the ideas that emerged were anything but.

Two concepts stood at the center. First, that healthy rivers are connected to their floodplains. Rivers are meant to move, braid, and interact with the valley floor rather than remain locked into deeply incised channels. Second, that rivers function as continuous systems from headwaters to sea. What happens on the land – roads, logging, development – inevitably shows up in the water.



Canton Creek snorkel survey crew, summer of 2021.

These ideas were not new to science. What was new was their articulation for policymakers. Pacific Rivers distilled the discussion into a white paper that later became the book *Entering the Watershed*. The work helped provide a scientific foundation for watershed-scale thinking. And with this, the makings of the Aquatic Conservation Strategy under the Northwest Forest Plan.

More than three decades later, watershed thinking is widely accepted in river conservation. But Charley will tell you there is still plenty of work to do to move the needle on restoration and conservation. He continues to teach in the classroom and in the field, and Charley's imprint is felt throughout Pacific Rivers' work.

He has taught many of us not just techniques, but ways of seeing — to look upstream, downstream, and across the landscape when trying to understand a river. The assumption that a watershed is the only honest unit of conservation. The emphasis on long-term monitoring. The recognition that restoration is a skill that needs development and attention. The belief that science should guide decisions, even when it complicates easy answers. Protect the whole watershed, and the river has a chance.

It's a simple idea. But like many simple ideas, it changed everything. Thank you Charley, we look forward to making more great things happen.

written by Liz Gilliam,
Pacific Rivers Conservation Program Manager



Charley in the field with his snorkel gear.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT!

We want to thank our many supporters for giving us the information, inspiration, motivation, and yes, funding, to tackle the most important river and watershed issues of our day. We could not do it without you.

OUR MISSION

The mission of Pacific Rivers is to protect and restore the watershed ecosystems of the Northwest to ensure river health, biodiversity and clean water for present and future generations.

OUR VISION

We work for the day when all the people of our region have clean drinking water sources; rivers are safe for ceremonies, boating, swimming and fishing; native fish populations are abundant, sustainable, and safe to eat; and healthy watersheds provide cool, clean water to river systems that are resilient to climate change.

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