



COQUILLE INDIAN TRIBE

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March 21, 2023

Senator Michael Denbrow and Representative Khanh Pham
Co-Chairs, Joint Subcommittee on Natural Resources
Oregon State Legislature
900 Court Street N.E.
Salem, Oregon 97301

Re: SB 5509 and ODFW POP 118 – Non-Native Fish Management

Jii-La Co-Chairs and Subcommittee Members!

In the Spring of 2021, ODFW staff met with our Tribal Council and advised us that the fall Chinook salmon population in the Coquille River was on the brink of extinction. We were advised that the projected fall Chinook return that year was 189 fish. The news of this stock collapse was shocking to us. For the 30 years prior to 2017, an average of nearly 11,000 fall Chinook reached their spawning grounds. In 2010, over 32,000 fall Chinook returned. Since 2017, the *best* chinook return we've had in the last four years is only 25% of the *worst* return we'd had in the prior 30+ years. ODFW advised us that the chinook were in such dire straits that there would be no opportunity for tribal members to harvest chinook salmon that year – *and perhaps not for another decade!* As Coquille people, we've harvested these fish since time began. The loss of this cultural legacy is heartbreaking to Coquille people.

Several other coastal fall Chinook populations have seen poor returns in recent years, but they are rebounding with increasing numbers – *but not the Coquille River fall Chinook*. ODFW shared the results of a 2020 assessment of the Coquille River fall Chinook collapse (and failure to rebound as other adjacent populations are). ***That assessment identified that a primary factor causing the collapse and limiting fall Chinook recovery is predation by illegally introduced non-native smallmouth bass.***

We met the dire news of the plight of our Coquille River chinook with bold and immediate action. The Coquille Tribe formally adopted a Declaration of Emergency. Our Declaration of Emergency redirected tribal funds and staff resources to partner with ODFW to launch an aggressive, joint invasive predator reduction campaign. Further, we proposed to Governor

Brown and Director Melcher that we enter into a first-of-its-kind Cooperative Agreement whereby the Tribe and ODFW join forces in managing fish and wildlife resources in Southwest Oregon. The Commission approved this historic co-management agreement June of 2022, and our most urgent priority is restoring the Coquille River and staving off the extinction of its fall Chinook. Rather than cast blame or demand more from the ODFW, the Coquille Tribe chose to join forces, share resources, and work shoulder-to-shoulder as sovereigns with a shared responsibility to address the Coquille River salmon crisis and also work together broadly over Southwest Oregon.

The Coquille Indian Tribe has committed *several hundred-thousand dollars of its own funds for the smallmouth bass suppression effort alone in the last 2+ years*. We purchased two electrofishing boats, hired new staff, and trained and redirected existing staff time to partner with ODFW on a full-court press attack on the invasives threat. The Coquille Indian Tribe made these commitments and sacrifices fully believing that the State of Oregon could and would do the same. The ODFW Policy Option Package 118 that would add staff and focus to address the non-native/invasive species threat was exactly the type of response we hoped for, and frankly, expected from our new state partner under the Cooperative Management Agreement.

Please support POP 118. We have much work to do together to heal the Coquille River system in full. Yet, the Tribe and ODFW concur that it is ***absolutely critical to remove as many of the invasive smallmouth bass now*** to sustain the chinook run while we work together on long-term habitat restoration and protection and restore resilience to the system in the face of climate change that is warming our river and allowing the invasive bass to multiply and spread. Like our own, local ODFW staff are fully taxed with a multitude of responsibilities. POP 118 would enable our ODFW co-managers to meet the Tribes' response to the Coquille River invasive/non-native predation emergency in-kind.

Further, NOAA Fisheries is presently conducting a status review of the Oregon Coast chinook Evolutionary Significant Unit to determine if it should be listed as threatened or endangered under the federal ESA. Coquille River fall Chinook are included in that ESU. A key part of NOAA's review is identifying threats, and evaluating the sufficiency of the actions we co-managers are deploying to address them. Non-native/invasive predatory smallmouth bass will be identified as a threat to Oregon Coast chinook in this review. The State of Oregon, stewards of these chinook salmon along with the Coquille Tribe, should not require a federal ESA listing to take action. We must hold ourselves to a higher standard. Again, I urge your support for POP 118. Doing so supports our historic Tribal-State cooperative fish and wildlife partnership.

Shuenhalni! (Take care!)



Brenda Meade
Chairman
Coquille Indian Tribe