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Moyle and Kitzhaber: Protecting healthiest remaining salmon ecosystems

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This spring's collapse of Sacramento chinook salmon stocks again has many of us who treasure this iconic and valuable species wondering what to do. Ongoing efforts to recover wild stocks listed as threatened or endangered are vital, but alone they won't ensure that our grandchildren will experience this magnificent species. In fact, beyond the Sacramento run, most salmon stocks from Central California to British Columbia have suffered steep declines. So what now?

To date, we've focused on the important work of repairing damaged river systems. While we must fix what's wrong with these systems, it's also vital to maintain the long-term integrity and productivity of our healthiest wild salmon rivers – known as salmon strongholds.

These core centers of wild salmon abundance and diversity generate the highest percentage of wild salmon so essential to our ecosystems, economies and cultures. For example, in the lower 48 states, roughly half of our wild salmon live in approximately 20 percent of existing salmon habitat.

These strongholds include the Salmon and Smith rivers in Northern California and the Illinois River in southern Oregon, which account for most of the diversity of salmon and steelhead in the region. Farther north, in Washington, the coastal rivers in the Olympic Peninsula produce more than half of Washington's sockeye and steelhead, and 40 percent of Washington's chinook, while the Skagit River accounts for approximately 30 percent of Washington's coho salmon.

Together, these rivers and others form a network of salmon strongholds along the West Coast that can sustain wild salmon into the future.

The good news is that efforts are under way to keep most of these rivers healthy and increase local economic opportunities. These efforts are embodied in the newly formed North American Salmon Stronghold Partnership. The partnership unites public and private resources in a voluntary, incentive-based approach to protect the healthiest remaining Pacific salmon ecosystems in North America.

The partnership includes local communities, state and federal agencies, nonprofit organizations, tribes, business interests and private landowners, who are working collaboratively on Pacific salmon conservation and restoration efforts.

With the assistance of more than 40 salmon experts brought together by the Wild Salmon Center, the partnership has already identified strongholds in California, Oregon, Washington and Idaho, highlighting our healthiest rivers and tributaries, and building a stronghold network to ensure that salmon enjoy sufficient habitat to adapt and evolve. In California, these places include, among others, the Smith, Salmon, Shasta, Mattole and Mad rivers in the northern part of the state, and

Butte, Mill and Deer creeks in the Central Valley.

Identifying the rivers is just the beginning. Once identified, the partnership will support local salmon leaders in strongholds to pursue the most important conservation actions necessary to restore and protect these rivers.

One such group, the Smith River Alliance, is working to acquire one of the last unprotected lands along the Hurdygurdy tributary in Northern California. Additionally, Trout Unlimited and California Trout are working on several collaborative projects in a number of strongholds, focusing on fish passage, water quality and quantity, and other factors that must be addressed to strengthen the productivity of these systems.

Rep. Mike Thompson, D-St. Helena, with the support of the California Department of Fish and Game and other congressional leaders, has taken note of these efforts and is considering legislation to accelerate voluntary, public-private actions in these and other wild salmon strongholds.

The salmon stronghold bill would complement the Endangered Species Act by promoting the protection and restoration of our healthiest wild salmon rivers. This legislation would leverage private dollars to support the highest priority conservation actions, streamline incentive-based programs and more effectively coordinate federal agency actions on stronghold rivers for the benefit of salmon and their ecosystems.

Communities living in wild salmon strongholds could choose to join the program, which will respect private property rights and provide critical funding to acquire easements and riparian lands, improve fish passage and reward fish-friendly land-management practices.

Building a network of salmon stronghold rivers will buffer against future wild salmon collapses, while gaining time for restoration efforts to succeed. The network will also help protect critical ecosystem services – clean water, healthy forests, carbon sequestration and fish habitat – that are necessary to mitigate climate change impacts.

Wild Pacific salmon have proven remarkably resilient to natural calamities, surviving an ice age, volcanic eruptions and large-scale ecosystem changes. Climate change presents new challenges, but by protecting the best remaining salmon ecosystems throughout their range, wild salmon can not only survive but thrive for generations to come.

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