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### **Government Delay, Drought Prompts Renewed Push for Protection of Klamath River Chinook Salmon**

PORTLAND, *Ore.*— Conservation groups filed a formal notice of intent to sue the National Marine Fisheries Service today for failing to decide, as legally required, whether upper Klamath River chinook salmon deserve protection under the federal Endangered Species Act. In response to a January 28, 2011 petition from the groups, the Fisheries Service determined in April 2011 that the salmon may warrant protection and began a status review that was supposed to be completed within one year of the petition. The petition review comes at a perilous time for Klamath salmon as fears of a major drought linger.

“Klamath River chinook have suffered severe declines in the face of a century of dam building, logging, hatcheries, massive water withdrawal and pollution,” said Noah Greenwald, endangered species director at the Center for Biological Diversity. “These magnificent fish need Endangered Species Act protection if they’re going to have any chance at survival and recovery. We very much hope protection will be provided in the next 60 days so we won’t have to file suit.”

The groups’ petition requested protection first and foremost for spring-run chinook, once the most abundant run of Klamath chinook but now near extinction. Biologists now count just 300 to 3,000 wild-spawning spring chinook each year. These fish are marvels of evolution, living most of their lives in the Pacific Ocean only to return to the river in the spring with enough fat reserves to survive without eating until early fall, when it’s time for them to spawn. They have long been prized as one of the best-tasting salmon species and historically the most economically important Klamath fish.

“We’ve seen chinook numbers dwindle to the point of crisis and with a looming drought year, we can’t wait any longer to figure out a plan to make sure these fish don’t go extinct,” said Steve Pederey, conservation director with Oregon Wild.

The Klamath Basin was once the third-largest producer of salmon and steelhead on the West Coast, but now produces fewer and fewer wild fish as a result of dams, habitat degradation and other factors. Overall, at least 300 miles of spawning habitat in the Klamath Basin have been

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made inaccessible by dams. Because of declines in the overall numbers of returning wild chinook, the petition also asked the Fisheries Service to consider protecting wild fall-run chinook.

“Chinook salmon are essential for sustaining wildlife and cultures in the Klamath Basin,” said Andrew Orahoske, conservation director for the Environmental Protection Information Center. “These amazing salmon are a vital, life-giving force to river communities and deserve to be protected for future generations.”

Recent river management has exacerbated the chinook’s plight. In the fall of 2002, Klamath River chinook suffered one of the worst fish kills in Northwest history when as many as 70,000 adult salmon died before spawning. Excessive water withdrawals, primarily from the federally run Klamath Irrigation Project, resulted in low flows and warm water temperatures that allowed disease to develop and spread quickly. Continued low flows and warm temperatures are key drivers of an ongoing disease crisis in the river that has sharply reduced survival of juvenile wild fish on their way to the ocean.

The federal delay in reviewing the Endangered Species Act petition for Klamath chinook comes at a dangerous time. Lower than normal snowpack in the region’s mountains has prompted worries that the water year could be even worse than the drought that precipitated the 2002 fish kill. The petitioners are hopeful that Endangered Species Act protections can help to shield Klamath chinook from the potentially disastrous effects of low river flows.

The Center for Biological Diversity, Oregon Wild, Environmental Protection Information Center and The Larch Company filed the notice of intent.

*The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 320,000 members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.*

*Since 1974, Oregon Wild has worked to protect and restore Oregon’s wildlands, wildlife, and waters as an enduring legacy for future generations.*

*The Environmental Protection Information Center (EPIC) works to protect and restore ancient forests, watersheds, coastal estuaries and native species in Northern California. EPIC uses an integrated, science-based approach, combining public education, citizen advocacy and strategic litigation.*

*The Larch Company is a for-profit, non-membership conservation organization that represents species who cannot talk and the human generations to come.*

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