

Press Release
Issued by the Governor's Chehalis Basin Work Group,
November 24, 2014

In April 2013, Governor Inslee tasked the Chehalis Basin Work Group with producing a recommendation for reducing flood damage and restoring habitat for salmon and other aquatic species across the Basin. The Legislature endorsed the Governor's action by providing \$28 million to implement on-the-ground projects and support a thorough, careful and transparent 16-month process by the Work Group to develop its recommendation. That work has been facilitated and coordinated by the William D. Ruckelshaus Center at the University of Washington and Washington State University, with the technical support and involvement of state agencies and other involved parties.

Last week, the work group submitted its recommendation to Governor Inslee; today, the Governor supports that recommendation.

The Work Group is comprised of David Burnett (former Chehalis Tribe Chairman), Vickie Raines (Cosmopolis Mayor and Chehalis Flood Authority Chair), Karen Valenzuela (Thurston County Commissioner and Chehalis Flood Authority Vice Chair), J. Vander Stoep (private attorney and Chehalis Flood Authority Pe Ell Alternate), Jay Gordon (farmer in lower Chehalis Basin and Washington Dairy Federation Executive Director), and Rob Duff (Policy Advisor to Governor Inslee).

The Work Group is recommending an integrated project for long-term flood-damage reduction and aquatic species restoration in the Chehalis Basin. Taken together, this suite of actions has a predicted benefit of over \$720 million, including -\$650 million in flood damage reduction and \$70 million from increasing by up to 50% returning adult salmon for tribal, commercial and recreational fisheries. The project will also reduce the threat to closure of I-5 from five days to one.

These recommended actions have other benefits not included in the cost-benefit analysis. For example, the Chehalis Basin is the only major river basin in Washington state where salmon species are not listed under the federal Endangered Species Act. A listing in the Basin would cause enormous societal and economic upheaval. There is an opportunity, by investing in aquatic habitat restoration now, to potentially avoid such listings, while reversing the decline in the salmon fishery.

The Work Group is recommending: 1) initiation of the permitting process for a concrete flood retention dam on the upper Chehalis River, 2) improvements to the Chehalis-Centralia Municipal Airport Levee, 3) an unprecedented Basin-wide effort to restore aquatic species, including restoration of over 100 miles of spawning and rearing habitat, 4) continued investment in the highest-priority, smaller-scale flood-damage reduction

projects including raising homes, floodproofing businesses and public structures, and 5) actions by counties and cities in the Basin to protect natural floodplain functions and ensure future development does not create more harm. These steps are recommended as an integrated whole, with specific guidance provided about sequencing and the pace of the work.

Implementing the Work Group recommendation will be challenging. Restoration of over 100 miles of the River will require the voluntary cooperation of many landowners and the technical skills of scientists at all levels of government. While there is broad support for water retention in the Basin, the Work Group acknowledges that its recommendation of a new water retention structure – a dam – is controversial. Dams, most in the U.S. built decades ago, have had negative impacts on natural resources. The Work Group has heard opposition to consideration of a dam from the Quinault Indian Nation and others. These concerns will be taken seriously in a formal evaluation, as part of a programmatic environmental impact statement. The dam being proposed is a next-generation dam. The proposed project to restore aquatic species habitat and to reduce catastrophic flood damage will only go forward if there is a significant net positive outcome for the fishery in the Basin.

The Work Group believes its recommendation to reduce flood damage and restore aquatic species is the best strategy for the long-term, especially in the face of climate change that is expected to increase the damages from flooding over historic levels and accelerate the decline of native species in the Basin.

Additional information is available at www.ruckelshauscenter.wsu.edu.

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