State of Washington
DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
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Chehalis Basin Board
Office of Chehalis Basin
P.O. Box 47600
Lacey, WA 98504-7600

Dear Board Members:

I would like to take this opportunity as the new Director of the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department) to provide my perspective on the development of the Chehalis Basin Strategy (Strategy) and the work of the Chehalis Basin Board.

I have been briefed on the process that has occurred over the last seven years by Governor's Chehalis Basin Work Group as supported by the William D. Ruckelshaus Center, and more recently by the Chehalis Basin Board and Department of Ecology's Office of the Chehalis Basin (OCB). I commend the open and transparent process that has engaged both tribes, local leaders and state agencies. The technical work over the last seven years has moved the basin from data poor to a much richer understanding of the ecological processes, aquatic species, and means to reduce flood damage. In addition, I am impressed by the number of on-the-ground projects for aquatic species restoration and flood damage reduction.

Specifically, I was pleased to hear that the OCB received the full $73.2 million in appropriations that was requested from the legislature. It speaks highly of the bipartisan support for addressing restoration and flood damage reduction in the Chehalis Basin and the efforts by the Board to meet these needs. To demonstrate our commitment to ensuring the continued success of this effort, the Department will be taking on the role of project sponsor for the five early action reach scale restoration projects, which is the first major on-the-ground effort for implementing the Aquatic Species Restoration Plan. These five projects will restore up to 12 miles of critical habitat for a diverse set of species in the basin.

The Chehalis Basin is a unique and special watershed. It is the second largest watershed wholly within Washington and supports some of the most extensive floodplains of any watershed in the state. It has the highest diversity of amphibians in the state and is the historic home to the recently federally listed Oregon spotted frog. Steelhead, Chinook, coho, and chum salmon all inhabit this watershed, and it is one of the last remaining regions of the state where none of these species is federally listed. The Chehalis River and its

tributaries provides for culturally and economically important commercial, sport, and tribal fisheries. However, there have been serious declines in the overall health of the watershed and therefore the salmon runs are a fraction of what they once were. The effects of climate change are predicted to have devastating impacts if we don't act soon and in a significant way. Spring Chinook would likely be listed and our ability to dig out of the hole will get more difficult and uncertain.

As has been previously stated, the Department has concluded that existing information and analyses indicate that adding a major dam on the Chehalis River would exacerbate negative effects for fish, wildlife, and habitat in the basin. This conclusion is supported by the modeling and analyses over the last several years and the weight of evidence from a century of knowledge about the effects of dams. I understand the dam being proposed would only operate during major floods and would allow unrestricted passage the majority of time. This will likely lessen the impacts relative to what we have seen from other dams.

The Chehalis Basin Strategy under development is considering an integrated program that combines an ambitious restoration program and flood damage reduction measures represents an innovative and broad-thinking approach; one that offers a unique opportunity for attention and long-term investment in the biological diversity and productivity of the Chehalis River Basin. However, a program of this magnitude offers a multitude of challenges, including garnering extensive and sustained community support, maintaining state interest and resources, and ensuring critical uncertainties are sufficiently addressed at pivotal stages along the way.

One of my predecessors, Phil Anderson, in 2014 provided a list of priorities for action to address the challenges. Below is the list and my understanding of the significant progress that has been made.

- Begin restorative actions immediately and establish robust monitoring programs to track success. *Numerous passage barriers have been corrected and five reach scale projects are in design. We have worked with the tribal staff to improve our monitoring of juvenile salmon migrations, adult spawners and evaluating the habitats of other species.*

- Address critical uncertainties through continued data collection and improved modeling. *There have been additions to the data and improvements to the models in use to predict the effects of climate, human development and restoration actions.*

- Ensure the restoration plan has clear goals and targets, functions as anticipated, and is adaptively managed for success. *An unprecedented protection and restoration plan is under development which will provide specific actions across the different sub-basins of the Chehalis.*

- Establish an inclusive program that successfully engages the local communities in a science-based restoration plan. *There have been numerous meetings with landowners, the agricultural community and other community leaders to build awareness and support for protection and restoration of aquatic species.*

- Complete a formal programmatic review of the entire program with a full range of alternatives prior to initiating project-level permitting. *Since Phil's letter, the Department of Ecology issued a draft and final programmatic Environmental Impact Statement that evaluated a range of options.*

There has been substantial progress on the points above and more work is in process to continue to improve our collective understanding of the basin and the options for aggressively pursuing solutions for aquatic species and flood damage reduction.

There were two additional points in Phil's letter that are critical to advance over the coming biennium.

- Forward a formal mitigation plan for review that encompasses fish, wildlife, and habitat impacts from a dam, as well as recreational and commercial fishing interests. This will be essential information for the Board and others to determine if a dam should be part of the long-term strategy.

- Commit to habitat restoration benefits that are well above and beyond impacts from flood damage reduction projects.

I want to add the need to examine the effects of current land use management programs to assess the potential future impacts from land development. There are estimates of the degradation from future development on salmon. It will be critical to develop recommendations that identify effective ways to reduce this degradation as we complete the Aquatic Species Restoration Plan.

As the process unfolds, the Department will continue to remain actively engaged and optimistic that a comprehensive and long-term solution for the basin includes the long-term health of habitat, fish, and wildlife. The Department's role will be to assure that the highest scientific standards and certainty are applied to ensure long-term success of a restoration program. We will also ensure that our responsibilities as co-manager are carried out with our tribal partners.

Thank you for considering the Department' s perspective and please contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,

Kelly Susewind
Director