

**Testimony of Thomas J. Weseloh
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Madam Chairman, members of the Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Pacific Salmon Stronghold Conservation Act (H.R. 2055). My name is Tom Weseloh and I have been serving as Manager of CalTrout's North Coast program since 1992.

California Trout (CalTrout) is one of the nation's first statewide conservation groups supported by trout fishermen with an altruistic goal of protecting and restoring California's wild trout and steelhead waters through conservation science, education, advocacy, and the law. Representing over 8,000 members, CalTrout envisions a future of healthy watersheds, wild flourishing streams and clean water for California's people, fish and wildlife.

My primary focus for CalTrout is crafting and implementing restoration and protection strategies for steelhead and trout. Prior to joining CalTrout, I worked for The Nature Conservancy, California Department of Fish and Game, Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Association, Humboldt State University Foundation, and as a fishing guide. I have had the privilege of being appointed to serve as a fisheries representative to many statewide and federal committees such as California's Advisory Committee on Salmon and Steelhead Trout, including chairing the Steelhead Subcommittee, California Coastal Salmonid Watershed Restoration Grant Peer Review Committee, the North Coast Integrated Regional Water Management Plan Technical Committee, and the Trinity Adaptive Management Working Group. I have served on several committees that provided recommendations and guidance for over \$200 million in state and federal fishery restoration funding. I am also a charter member of the Smith River Advisory Council and serve as the Salmon Stronghold Partnership Basin Liaison for the Smith River.

In my testimony today, I would like to give you an on-the-ground perspective from an organization with a strong partnership ethic that works in many of California's rivers. I will discuss the need for an explicit federal policy on protecting wild salmon strongholds through cooperative conservation, and will share with you the value, from the local perspective, of participating in the initiative.

With headline news of the collapse of Sacramento Chinook fisheries in the past two years and Endangered Species Act (ESA) listings, one might get the impression that the demise of our wild Pacific salmon stocks is irreversible. I am happy to report that is not the case. In fact, the tide has turned in many of our region's most important salmon rivers. Efforts to protect and restore these extraordinary places are gaining momentum, but they need federal support.

As you know, we have spent more money on ESA listed salmon stocks than any other endangered species in the history of the Act. Recovery of listed stocks is critical, but will take time and will have limited success in some areas. From my perspective, we have been investing primarily in many of the depleted stocks in rivers whose productivity over the years has been severely impaired by dams, urbanization, diversions and other forces. In some cases, these rivers top the list of the most challenging places to restore wild fish populations. Meanwhile, our best scientists and fishery managers

have reminded us to pay closer attention to rivers on the other end of the spectrum – our healthiest rivers. These core centers of abundance and diversity serve as seed stocks for wild fisheries and are among the rivers most likely to be resilient to climate change.

Complementing recovery with preventative conservation in our most productive wild salmon rivers is essential to complete a more comprehensive and holistic strategy that will better ensure that salmon recover and thrive. But it will not happen without a clear federal policy directive and modest resources to leverage state and private funds already at work in these rivers.

The *Pacific Salmon Stronghold Conservation Act* will provide the focus and resources necessary to be successful in our healthiest wild salmon rivers and will restore balance to our efforts to recover depleted stocks and maintain our healthy ones.

We Need a Federal Salmon Stronghold Policy

We need a federal salmon stronghold policy for at least three important reasons.

First, several key components of a federal salmon policy already are in place. These are framed by the Pacific Salmon Commission’s international obligations established by the Pacific Salmon Treaty between Canada and the United States; the Endangered Species Act; and various harvest and hatchery management bodies. Absent from this list is specific, focused recognition and support for voluntary, incentive-based efforts to protect and restore our healthiest and most productive wild salmon ecosystems. This approach applies the maxim “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Current salmon funding and management policies often make it difficult for healthy rivers to secure resources for preventative actions.

Second, the life cycle of salmon crosses federal, state, tribal, and private lands and marine ecosystems. Managing and conserving salmon in an effective and holistic way requires cooperation among all these entities. Federal entities almost always have significant management or regulatory responsibilities in these Western river systems. The *Pacific Salmon Stronghold Conservation Act* will ensure the full participation, cooperation and coordination of federal entities to implement federal policies more effectively and efficiently. It will keep them at the table and help advance the broadly supported, community-based initiatives advanced by local groups.

Finally, U.S. leadership will invigorate efforts well underway in Russia, Canada and Japan to implement a stronghold approach with a view towards creating a range-wide learning network of salmon strongholds spanning the North Pacific.

I will discuss each of these reasons in turn, as experienced through my participation in river conservation initiatives underway in the Pacific Northwest and California.

The Smith River Stronghold – a model of cooperative conservation

Let’s look at these three issues through the lens of the first California River recognized by the North American Stronghold Partnership as a wild salmon stronghold – the Smith River.

Located on California’s North Coast, in Del Norte County, the Smith is California’s only major undammed river system, supporting our healthiest wild runs of coho and Chinook salmon, steelhead, coastal cutthroat trout and one of California’s few populations of chum salmon.

The Smith River watershed exemplifies the rich biological diversity of the Klamath/Siskiyou region with a rich assemblage of fish, birds, reptiles and mammals including black bear, mountain lion, wolverine, northern spotted owl, endangered Del Norte salamander, and tailed frog.

Voluntary, incentive-based conservation efforts on the Smith have accelerated in the past decade, reflecting a new paradigm of “cooperative conservation.” The Smith River Advisory Council (SRAC), formed in 1990, has united watershed stakeholders with a common goal. Conservation groups, fishing interests, ranchers, timber companies, private landowners, and local, state, federal and tribal governments and agencies have joined together, expressing a shared value in maintaining the many ecological, economic, social and cultural benefits that a healthy Smith River generates. SRAC efforts enjoy broad based support and full inclusion of the community. The community strongly endorsed the Smith River nomination as a stronghold. SRAC’s Salmon Stronghold Partnership collaboration and membership was supported unanimously.

Intact, well-functioning ecological processes in the watershed provide myriad ecological services including drinking water, flood control, water for irrigated agricultural and abundant recreation. The forested areas of the Smith regulate water flow, filter pollutants and sequester carbon, in addition to providing habitat and timber products.

The Smith also provides economically valuable commercial and recreational fishing opportunities. It is arguably one of the best places in the state for salmon, steelhead and trout fishing. According to the American Sportfishing Association, there are 2.4 million people who participate in recreational salmon fishing in California, an activity that is worth \$4 billion (Fimrite, 2008).

Strongholds Need Federal Support to Implement High Conservation Value Actions

Stakeholders in the Smith know that we can avoid costly restoration by maintaining a healthy and well functioning ecosystem – that prevention is less expensive than restoration. But they also know that impairing ecological function itself carries heavy hidden costs, by reducing the value of the ecological services that are lost (drinking water, for example). While we may quibble over the details now and then, our broadly shared vision to protect and restore the Smith provides a solid foundation for our diverse partners.

The public-private alliances operating in the Smith, however, need federal recognition and support to enable their work. For example, the Smith and several rivers like it are currently not a good “fit” for federal or state funding to determine the amount of salmon returning to the river from the ocean. Uncertainty over fish returns impedes fish managers from setting conservation-minded harvest levels or establishing science-based escapement targets. The Smith and other strongholds often do not fare well in the allocation of federal and state resources for monitoring, restoration or other actions precisely because they are in better shape than many other rivers. For example, the Smith may not qualify for federal or state funding because it has fewer species listed as endangered or threatened, or less difficulty meeting national clean water standards. In short, we are often penalized for having healthy fishery populations and good water quality.

It is unwise to pit healthier, intact river systems against more degraded ones. We should not tinker with grant criteria or national standards designed to meet more than the needs of wild salmon. Instead,

federal policy should explicitly recognize the need to maintain the ecological integrity of these rivers and provide modest resources and flexibility to address their most important needs.

This is just one example of a specific need in the Smith. Strongholds elsewhere need support of their highest conservation value needs across a wide spectrum—from conservation easements, land exchanges, fish passage, and wild fish zones to rewarding farmers, ranchers and others for good land and water stewardship. The Salmon Stronghold Act recognizes these needs, allowing a flexible approach to marshal private and public resources to invest in the “highest value conservation actions” within strongholds, as determined by watershed experts. It recognizes the need to address, through voluntary means, all the “H”s (habitat, hydro, harvest and hatchery). It also recognizes the vital role federal entities play to coordinate, cooperate and actively participate in these efforts.

Cooperation, Coordination and Local “Opt-in” Approach

The Salmon Stronghold Partnership respects local communities, tribes, watershed councils and other basin interests. Based on a strong scientific foundation, the *Pacific Salmon Stronghold Conservation Act* will identify strongholds in wild salmon eco-regions in California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Alaska. Identified strongholds only participate in the program once a diverse and representative group of stakeholders and interests from the stronghold “opt-in” by expressing interest in participating in the stronghold partnership, including an initial identification of their highest value conservation needs.

Most strongholds involve multiple federal agencies, each exercising its statutory responsibility as a land manager or regulator. The *Pacific Salmon Stronghold Conservation Act* does not alter their mandate in any way, but requires them to cooperate and coordinate to ensure that their policies and programs are consistent with maintaining the river as a core center of abundance and diversity for wild salmon. While most federal agencies have been enthusiastic participants in the Salmon Stronghold Partnership, without a federal policy establishing stronghold conservation as a priority, their attention will likely be drawn to other priorities and programs recognized by Congress.

Cross-cutting, Multi-site Issues

The *Pacific Salmon Stronghold Conservation Act* provides a mechanism to explore and propose solutions to cross-cutting policies affecting multiple strongholds. Similarly, the Act provides a forum for the Smith River and other strongholds to share best practices and problem-solving strategies, including state-of-the-art conservation planning tools, innovative incentive-based pilots and other valuable information.

One of the most important of these cross-cutting issues is climate change. Salmon strongholds from California to Alaska are representative of some of our most intact, well functioning river systems. The Salmon Stronghold Partnership is closely monitoring ongoing research by climatologists and salmon experts to determine which rivers are likely to be most resilient to climate change. We already know that relatively intact, complex watersheds are likely to provide critical refugia for salmon and other species, and that wild salmon are well suited to develop new life history strategies to adapt to these changes.

Indeed, protecting core populations of wild salmon genetic diversity in California – the southern-most range of Pacific salmon—will give salmon a better chance to adapt and thrive in a period of warming

oceans and rapid environmental change. Protection of these stocks is critical to ensure the survival of the species across the North Pacific.

International Cooperation

Ultimately, wild salmon will not thrive throughout their range without coordination and cooperation between salmon-bearing nations of the North Pacific. The Smith River is but one node in a string of wild salmon strongholds stretching across the arc of the Pacific Rim. Fortunately, efforts are well underway in Canada and Russia to adopt a stronghold approach, and to share information and approaches from these model sites (see www.wildsalmoncenter.org). Russia recently created the world's first whole watershed salmon protected area in salmon-rich Kamchatka, and is actively considering protecting spawning and rearing grounds on several other rivers. Canada has adopted a Wild Salmon Policy and the government-commissioned Pacific Fishery Resources Conservation Council is considering formally adopting the stronghold approach and joining the Salmon Stronghold Partnership. U.S. leadership will invigorate these efforts and provide a platform for deeper civil society cooperation between the people of these nations.

A Future Vision

In closing, I'd like to bring you back to the Smith River for a minute and share a vision of how the successful implementation of the *Pacific Salmon Stronghold Conservation Act* will look. Years from now, the Smith will remain a model of a healthy, well functioning wild salmon ecosystem. Together with a broad, diverse group of partners including our federal agencies and departments, we have aligned federal, state and local policies and programs to ensure that communities residing in the basin are benefiting economically, ecologically, socially and culturally from our wild salmon river. Regionally, we have maintained the ecological integrity of our most productive rivers, and have not only held the line on the decline of salmon populations but increased their numbers and productivity. Some ESA listed populations are showing strong signs of recovery and now, with the support of our core stronghold populations, can be de-listed. Like other stronghold rivers across the Pacific, we are benefiting from exchange of information and approaches from similar rivers linked in a virtual network across the North Pacific, and we are closely monitoring the regional status and trends of our shared wild salmon populations.

With your leadership, our elected officials can help realize this vision and empower our efforts to demonstrate a community-supported, ecosystem-based approach that can serve as a model for others. I ask you to join the California Fish and Game Commission, Oregon and Washington Governors, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, and the many other state, local, and private participants to support the *Pacific Salmon Stronghold Conservation Act*.

Thank you.