

**Testimony of Sara LaBorde
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Madam Chairman, members of the Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to provide my views on the Pacific Salmon Stronghold Conservation Act (S. 817).

My name is Sara LaBorde and I serve as Special Assistant to the Director of Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (“WDFW”) and Chair of the Salmon Stronghold Partnership. My primary responsibilities at the Department of Fish and Wildlife concern statewide salmon recovery and hatchery and harvest reform implementation. Prior to this, I served as Regional Director for WDFW’s Coastal and Hood Canal region, Special Assistant to the WDFW Commission, as well as the Public Involvement Coordinator. I have worked for WDFW for over twenty years. However, I began my career with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources restoring trout streams and improving state forestlands. Before moving to Washington, I spent three years with the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation starting their wildlife education program and Project WILD.

Today, I would like to share with you the perspective from a state fish and wildlife manager and someone who has been engaged with the Salmon Stronghold Partnership from the outset. Principally, I hope to address:

- 1) The need and opportunity to “complete the picture” in salmon management and conservation by explicitly supporting voluntary, incentive-based protection and restoration of our healthiest remaining wild salmon populations; and
- 2) How the Pacific Salmon Stronghold Conservation Act of 2009 (“Salmon Stronghold Act”) will assist Washington State and others’ efforts to integrate fish management and conservation into a comprehensive and holistic “All H” framework.

**FEDERAL POLICY TO IDENTIFY AND PROTECT SALMON STRONGHOLDS WILL
“COMPLETE THE PICTURE” OF SALMON CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT**

Current federal salmon policy recognizes the need for international cooperation on this highly transboundary species through the U.S.– Canada Pacific Salmon Treaty (creating the Pacific Salmon Commission to implement the treaty and advise on harvest allocation and related management issues) and the North Pacific Anadromous Fish Commission (ban on North Pacific high seas salmon fishing). Federal policy also shapes salmon conservation and management through the Endangered Species Act, funded in large part through the Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund.

While each of these federal mandates and authorities fulfills an important piece of national salmon policy, there is a compelling need to also enact a federal policy to support the identification, protection and restoration of our healthiest remaining wild salmon ecosystems—“salmon strongholds”. As I will explain, protecting our strong populations and the functioning watersheds they support restores to prominence a fundamental tenet of conservation biology—to conserve core centers of species abundance, productivity, and genetic diversity.

A Sharp Focus on Wild Salmon Strongholds

The purpose of the Salmon Stronghold Partnership is to identify and protect a network of the healthiest remaining wild Pacific salmon ecosystems in North America to ensure the long-term survival of salmon and the many species that depend on them. The Stronghold Partnership is a voluntary, incentive-based initiative intended to complement ongoing ecosystem protection and restoration efforts by providing leadership, enhanced coordination, and public and private resources to support strategies that prevent declines in the health of salmon strongholds. The Partnership includes federal, tribal, state, and local governments and nonprofit organizations who are working collaboratively on salmon conservation activities across Washington, Oregon, Idaho, California, and Alaska.

The Salmon Stronghold Act will provide a high-level forum to improve coordination among key public and private actors, address cross-cutting issues affecting multiple strongholds, and leverage private funds to implement high value conservation actions within strongholds. Our goal is to improve policies affecting strong salmon populations and deliver public and private resources as efficiently as possible directly to local entities implementing protection and restoration actions.

The Salmon Stronghold Act will assist state governments like Washington State to accelerate implementation of a holistic, comprehensive salmon conservation and management approach that integrates all the “H’s” (habitat, harvest, hatchery and hydro).

State and Tribal salmon management has been focusing on developing ways to protect wild populations while harvesting hatchery fish. This focus on meeting conservation needs and harvest goals for a variety of stakeholders has led us to understand the importance of all the H’s: habitat, hatcheries, harvest and hydropower—working together to implement ecosystem-based wild salmon goals. Washington’s experience and experimentation in this area is instructive, with its tribal and state co-managed salmon fisheries and presence of both ESA-listed and non-listed wild salmon stocks.

Recently, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife adopted an integrated “All-H” management framework to overcome the historic “silo” approach to determining harvest, hatchery and habitat strategies and approaches. Identifying strongholds and coordinating federal efforts with state, tribal and private ones will fill a hole in salmon protection and restoration for populations critical to maintaining the long term abundance and diversity of wild stocks. Stronghold sites, and the organizational capacity provided by the make-up of public and private actors engaged in the Salmon Stronghold Partnership, provide an ideal venue to pilot salmon policy integration strategies, in addition to accelerating ongoing protection and restoration actions in these systems.

In its recent review of all of Washington’s hatchery programs, the congressionally-sponsored Hatchery Scientific Review Group (HSRG) concluded that:

- (a) Hatchery and harvest reforms alone will not achieve recovery of listed populations (habitat improvements are also necessary), and
- (b) The effectiveness of habitat actions will be greatly increased if they are combined with hatchery and harvest reforms.

Under the HSRG assumptions, analysis of the “Primary” populations in the Lower Columbia Chinook Evolutionary Significant Unit suggests that the benefits of habitat quality improvements would more than double if combined with hatchery reforms. The Salmon Stronghold Act will provide the focus and forum to bring these elements together for strong populations (see www.hatcheryreform.us; Columbia River Hatchery Reform Project; Final Systemwide Report, p. 12).

Salmon Conservation and Management requires system-wide, cross-cutting policy coordination and harmonization. The Salmon Stronghold Partnership provides a unique cooperative forum for public and private stakeholders to improve our salmon management and conservation policies.

The salmon lifecycle crosses freshwater and marine domains, political boundaries, and land ownerships. Salmon challenge our commitment to “eco-system based management” in practical ways, not the least of which is to align the policies and approaches of our federal land managers and regulatory bodies to ensure compatibility with state and local salmon conservation and management objectives. Existing federal salmon policies and the important role that federal land managers and regulators play in salmon strongholds makes the federal government a critical partner in this arena.

State managers consider better federal, state and local policy coordination and implementation at a broad, regional scale a major need and opportunity addressed by the Salmon Stronghold Act. Many challenges and threats exist that transcend watershed boundaries and exacerbate existing problems that limit populations within a particular basin. Unlike basin-specific limiting factors, however, which often require “on-the-ground” solutions implemented at the watershed or reach scale, challenges like climate change can be more effectively addressed through “programmatic remedies” that can reach across multiple strongholds. In many cases, programmatic remedies can be tested and demonstrated in strongholds and then replicated in others.

Because most federal and state salmon conservation programs focus financial and technical support on specific watershed level restoration strategies, programmatic solutions are often difficult to design and finance under existing programs. This is especially true for new and innovative approaches or policies that are untested, but may be applicable and effective across multiple basins. This Act will enable the Salmon Stronghold Partnership to support programmatic remedies that reach across multiple strongholds by integrating government policies and programs while recommending specific reforms where appropriate. By facilitating improved policy integration, innovation, and targeted reforms, the Stronghold Partnership can remove obstacles to and increase the effectiveness of existing salmon conservation and recovery efforts. The “All-H” integration strategy described above is an excellent example of a broadly supported programmatic remedy that can be championed by the Stronghold Partnership. A few additional examples of necessary programmatic initiatives that have been raised by our partners include:

1. Promote climate change mitigation strategies in salmon strongholds

Leading scientists tell us that intact, functioning ecosystems are critical to mitigating the impacts of climate change on wild salmon populations. Because salmon are an inherently resilient and adaptive species, strong populations provide the diverse genetic reservoirs necessary for the species to adapt to changing watershed conditions across their large region. However, in order to adapt, these populations require complex, intact habitats that maintain their diversity. The Salmon Stronghold Partnership provides an ideal voluntary, incentive-based vehicle to develop and pilot climate change mitigation strategies at a meaningful, multi-state regional scale. As climate change science continues to improve, mitigation strategies are being developed, but few if any of these focus directly on promoting salmon resilience. Because the Stronghold Partnership has explicitly recognized the role of strongholds in buffering the impacts of climate change on salmon, it is uniquely positioned to translate emergent climate change science into management and policy.

2. Integrating working landscapes and salmon conservation

In Washington and elsewhere in the West, public-private partnerships are emerging to devise new approaches to sustaining working landscapes while promoting watershed conservation. The Stronghold

Partnership will support a variety of innovative approaches that advance this objective, ranging from those that leverage market forces to incentivize salmon conservation to those that reduce the adverse impacts of historic settlement and development patterns. In Washington's Wenatchee Basin, for example, land use is driven by a patchwork of local, state, federal, and private land ownership. This ownership pattern and the inefficiencies it promotes present challenges for both private landowners—who struggle with inefficient fire management, invasive species control, and trespass—and the conservation community, which must contend with spatially inconsistent implementation of conservation plans. Because salmon use of a wide variety of aquatic habitats throughout a watershed, landscape fragmentation undermines both the watershed's restoration potential and the health of its wild salmon populations.

Neither the agricultural community nor conservation interests in the Wenatchee basin have been able to address fragmentation. Under this Act, the Salmon Stronghold Partnership Board could both elevate this issue as a priority amongst federal agencies and provide funding to local partners to initiate a project to work with local landowners, local, state and tribal governments to address this important issue. The Board could replicate this approach throughout strongholds. In doing so, the Board would not only address a key limitation to long term stronghold health, but also promote efficiencies across many of the west's working landscapes.

A Winning Strategy for Wild Salmon

The Board and many partners of the Salmon Stronghold Partnership are enthusiastic about increasing our attention on the nation's healthiest wild salmon populations. We all know that prevention will save money, avoiding costly restoration. We also know that success will require the sustained commitment and leadership from a diverse group of public and private interests, whose equal roles must be acknowledged and empowered by our federal government.

The Salmon Stronghold Partnership program relies on science and conservation biology principles to identify healthy stronghold populations and high value conservation needs for these populations. While we use science to identify the stronghold populations, the allocation of project funding requires local buy-in and support. This is designed to ensure a true partnership among local, state, federal and tribal governments, private landowners, and non-governmental organizations working together to successfully conserve healthy wild Pacific salmon populations.

The Salmon Stronghold Act will demonstrate the federal government's recognition of this shared undertaking and the solid scientific foundation upon which it rests.

I urge you to join me, every Pacific salmon state and a diverse and growing number of local, regional and national organizations in supporting the Pacific Salmon Stronghold Conservation Act of 2009 by passing this bipartisan bill. On behalf of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Salmon Stronghold Partnership, I would like to thank you for the invitation to submit testimony and participate in today's hearing, and for your time in consideration of these issues.