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Friday, February 9, 2008

Honorable Senator Phil Rockefeller, Chair of Senate Committee on Water,
Energy, and Telecommunications
Washington State Legislature
Olympia, Washington 98504

Dear Senator Phil Rockefeller:

In response to your request after my testimony representing Sierra Club re SB 6874 at the Senate Committee on Water, Energy, and Telecommunications on Tuesday, these written comments are an expansion of my oral testimony.

As we noted in the hearing, Sierra Club respects the Spokane Tribe and the Colville Confederated Tribes and works with them on water and other issues. Sierra Club does not oppose money payments to the Tribes as mitigation for historic grievous harms by the State, nor for recent or future harms.

Sierra Club is, however, troubled by the bill because it represents *another* impairment of the Columbia River and its salmon runs. Our society gives lip service to protecting the Columbia, its salmon and other fish and wildlife, but we continue to inflict harms.

If this bill must be passed then please consider the following ways to make it better for the Columbia River, its salmon, and its general ecology. Sierra Club would like to work with you to improve SB 6874.

Sierra Club suggests 6 principles that would improve the bill:

- 1 There should be no subsidized grants of water.** The beneficiaries of new water withdrawals from the Columbia should pay for the water. If there is no market for water that is reasonably priced (i.e., recoups the commitments to the tribes, the costs of building infrastructure to store and transport the water, and the energy costs associated with pumping out of Lake Roosevelt), then the State of Washington should not get into the business of providing free water to eastern Washington water users.
- 2 New withdrawals of water should be accompanied by water conservation standards and efficiency standards that are aggressive and mandatory.** Water should not be provided to new and existing water users until they can demonstrate fully efficient use. The bill should also provide for monitoring to ensure compliance with conservation and efficiency standards.

3 A Cost Benefit Analysis provision should be added to the bill, and

4 A Water Use Analysis provision should be added to the bill.

Both of these types of analyses are required for new storage projects under the 2006 Columbia River Management bill, now codified at RCW 90.90.010(3)(a). These analyses are needed here too.

5. The state must ensure that negative environmental consequences do not result from the proposed drawdown. We know that lowering the level of Lake Roosevelt will expose toxics along the shores, which may be a serious problem if winds pick them up and put them in the air that people who live nearby will breathe. We know that there are insufficient instream flows in the Columbia River – a problem remarked on by the National Academies of Sciences and the subject of massive litigation in the federal courts. The Columbia River is also impaired for water quality throughout its length, including problems resulting from dam operations and water diversion from the River. This bill should direct the state to evaluate environmental and public health impacts of the proposal before making commitments of water to third parties.

6. The legislature needs to clarify how this bill connects with the Columbia River Management bill of 2 years ago, and identify the combined effects of the two bills. With minimal recognition of the relationship between the two pieces of legislation, we are piecemealing without acknowledgement, without studies, without noticing cumulative effects on a river system that has suffered a thousand cuts and more. All parties need to be aware that the Columbia River Management bill has led to half a dozen proposals for new dams and reservoirs on tributaries of the Columbia. These proposals are in addition to the several existing dams on the mainstem Columbia -- again, ignoring cumulative effects. Under the Columbia River Management bill, we are on track to spend tens of millions of dollars on studies and billions more on the projects themselves, but have yet to analyze alternative water supply solutions that have the least negative impact on the environment. Such solutions include aggressive and mandatory water conservation and efficiency.

In truth we should not be withdrawing additional water from the Columbia River. Every such withdrawal adds to the cumulative effect of all the previous harms. If we contemplate a new withdrawal, we must scrutinize the particular plan to be certain that it will not do harm to the salmon, environmental and public health values, and we must certainly ask whether the off-stream uses truly are necessary, and whether they can be met in other ways that will not have negative impacts.

We must do a better job of putting our words and actions together in a way that restores the river, rather than harming it. We must refrain from acting without first thinking through the cumulative impacts, gathering data, and doing studies, so that we are aware of what damage our actions are likely to cause. Continuing to fail to do this will allow us to hide our heads -- as do ostriches -- while we harm the environmental values we care about.

Finally, we would note that the state is in a budget crunch this year and yet we seem to be eager to push this bill to passage even though it carries a large price tag, for this and future years, and the appropriate studies have not been done.

Thank you for your consideration of our concerns. While we appreciate the outreach and efforts of the Governor's Office to the tribes in northeastern Washington, we remain deeply concerned with the overall program of water project subsidies that do not properly account for environmental and public health issues. Please feel free to contact Craig Engelking at 360-561-7701 or Patricia Sumption at 206-525-1708, for more information or to discuss this letter.

Respectively Yours,

Patricia Sumption
Water and Salmon Committee,
Cascade Chapter of Sierra Club

cc: Members of the Committee:

Senator Ed Murray, Vice Chair
Senator Jim Honeyford
Senator Jerome Delvin
Senator Karen Fraser
Senator Brian Hatfield
Senator Janea Holmquist
Senator Bob Morton
Senator Eric Oemig
Senator Craig Pridemore
Senator Debbie Regala

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