



NEWS RELEASE – FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Middle Fork Salmon River outfitters “thrilled” to support Simpson’s plan to save endangered salmon and steelhead

STANLEY, Idaho – (Feb. 9, 2021) – Idaho’s Middle Fork Outfitters Association wholeheartedly supports a new, innovative \$33 billion plan sponsored by Congressman Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, to restore endangered salmon and steelhead runs to sustainable levels in Idaho and the Pacific Northwest.

Simpson’s plan calls for removing four Lower Snake River dams in 2030-31 to restore approximately 140 miles of the Lower Snake River from Lewiston to Kennewick, Wash., to a natural, free-flowing condition and to compensate stakeholder groups that could be negatively affected by dam removal.

That 140-mile section of dams and reservoirs kills juvenile salmon and steelhead as they try to migrate downstream to the Pacific Ocean and adults when they return 800-900 miles from the Pacific Ocean to spawn a new generation in Idaho. Dam impacts include fish getting killed in turbines, dying in hot water reservoirs, juvenile fish getting trapped and disoriented in the reservoirs, fish eaten by predators, and more. The four dams and reservoirs have been in place since the early 1960s to 1975, when the last project, Lower Granite, was completed. (see graph below on page 3)

“The Middle Fork is like the Noah’s Ark to these fish,” said Dustin Aherin, President of MFOA and Idaho River Adventures in Lewiston. “It’s totally pure, clean cold water, and pristine habitat. We agree with Congressman Simpson that if we can’t stand by any longer and watch our salmon and steelhead runs go extinct.”

Aherin pointed that Simpson and his staff had held more than 300 meetings with constituent groups over the last two years to come up with his plan. “He really did his homework, and looking at the declining fish runs and the \$17 billion spent over the last 30 years to tweak hydro operations, at the end of the day, we’re just losing our fish,” Aherin says.

In his video message, Simpson noted that only 3,763 wild Snake River Spring Chinook returned to Idaho to spawn the next generation in 2019. That compares to a 10-year average of 62,400.

“The current system is clearly not working,” Simpson said. “In the end, we realized that there is no viable path that can allow us to keep the dams in place.”

“I am thrilled this is happening,” said Jerry Hughes with Hughes River Expeditions in Stanley. “Simpson’s plan looks like the only viable chance we have to save salmon and steelhead. Those Lower Snake Dams have proven to be the thing that tipped over the whole ecosystem.”

The 100-mile Middle Fork of the Salmon River, one of the nation’s original National Wild and Scenic Rivers, is located entirely inside the 2.4-million-acre Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness in Central Idaho. Middle

Fork outfitters are excited about the prospect of seeing restored salmon and steelhead runs providing a huge shot in the arm for rural communities up and down the Salmon River system in Idaho, from Lewiston to Riggins to Stanley, and points in between.

“Oh my god, it would just be amazing,” says Colin Hughes, manager of Hughes River Expeditions. “Our rural economies would just go through the roof. I mean, we could have salmon fishing that would be similar to what’s offered right now in Bristol Bay.”

All 27 members of the Middle Fork Outfitters Association support the Simpson plan, officials said.

“I’m definitely in support of removing the Lower Snake Dams,” said Ken Helfrich, owner of Helfrich Outfitters, based in Salmon, Idaho. “That would be long overdue.”

Adds Steve Zettel, owner of the Idaho Wilderness Company in Challis, Idaho, “We have no salmon! Welcome to Salmon-less Idaho. What do I say to a kid who asks me why they call it the Middle Fork of the Salmon River, when there’s no salmon! That’s the bottom line folks.”

Middle Fork outfitters point out that right now, they are suffering impacts from the “salmon wars” and restrictions enforced by state or federal authorities such as reduced or no salmon seasons, and early-season closures on the Middle Fork (no filling of canceled permits) and upper Main Salmon in Stanley because of salmon-spawning activity. MFOA has supported a program where the Salmon-Challis National Forest marks salmon redds on the Middle Fork so outfitters and private boaters can steer around them.

The concept of actually being able to fish for Chinook salmon as part of the Middle Fork trip would be a huge value-add, Helfrich says. “I remember seeing people catching salmon at the Middle Fork Lodge when I was a kid. That big hole across from Sunflower Hot Springs was another good place to catch salmon. I remember hooking one in the big pool across from Whitey Cox camp.

“If there’s ever a time to do this, now is the time and the iron is hot,” Helfrich says. “It’s crucial that we do this now, or we will have a salmon-less Salmon River. And to me, that’s unthinkable.”

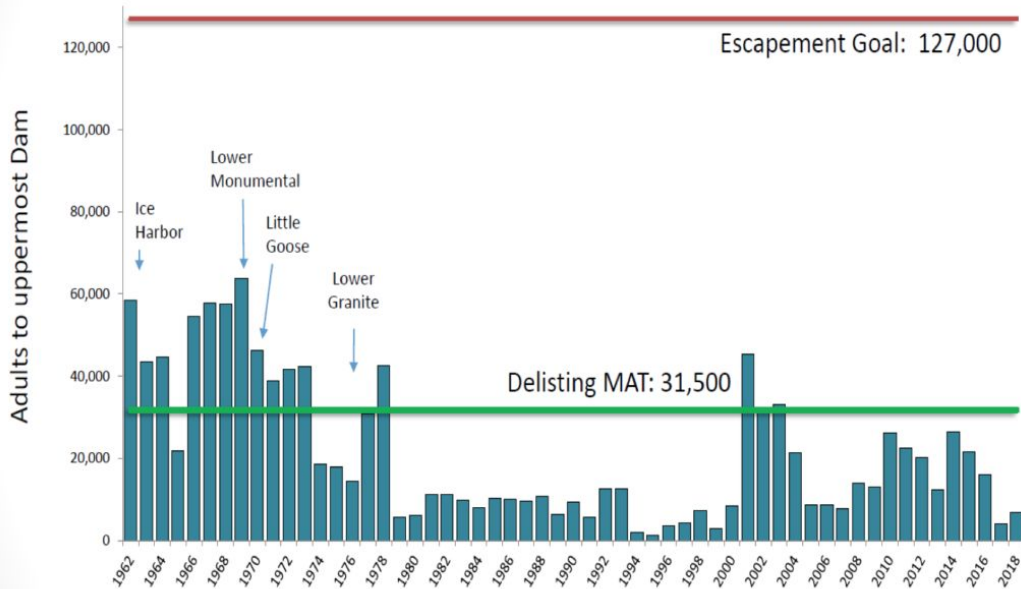
The Middle Fork outfitters agree with fish biologists who have complained about a dramatic reduction in biomass in the Salmon River ecosystem that other species have evolved with over thousands of years. When healthy runs of salmon returned to spawn the next generation, their carcasses would decompose on the banks of the river or in the stream, releasing a huge amount of nutrients into the river.

“I’ve seen a decline in the salmon fly population because of the loss of that biomass,” Helfrich says. “We’re seeing a decline in aquatic life because of the loss of those nutrients.”

The Middle Fork is considered to be the “Best River trip in the World,” according to whitewater experts. The Middle Fork features gin-clear clean water with catch-and-release trout fishing, camping on natural sand beaches bordered by forests, and floating on the river in whitewater rafts, inflatable kayaks or hardshell kayaks for 6-8 days and 100 miles of wilderness bliss.

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Wild/Natural Spring/Summer Chinook Salmon



Graph shows steady decline of Snake River spring/summer chinook as the Lower Snake dams are built from 1962-1975. The fish were listed as “threatened” in the early 1990s and Redfish Lake sockeye were listed as “endangered.”

Snake River Adult Steelhead

