

Chehalis River Dam



Photo: Shane Anderson

The Chehalis Basin Board is proposing the **construction of a flood mitigation dam on one of the last remaining free-flowing rivers on the west coast**. If built, the dam will impact some of the only remaining wild, non-listed salmon runs in Washington State, as well as the **endangered Southern Resident orcas** who rely on them.

TAKE ACTION:

Contact [Governor Inslee](#) and your Washington State legislators (find your legislators [here](#)) and let them know that you oppose the construction of a flood retention facility on the Chehalis River. Encourage them to support local non-dam alternatives that will benefit everyone in the Chehalis Basin while protecting salmon and Southern Resident orcas.

This is a constantly developing issue. Please check back here and on our Orca Network Facebook page for updated information and action alerts.

Background Information:

The Issue:

The Chehalis River is the second largest river in Washington State and one of the only remaining free flowing rivers on the west coast. It is one of the biggest producers of wild (non-hatchery) salmon. It contains 31 salmonid stocks, and supports spawning of wild spring Chinook, fall Chinook, Coho, and Steelhead. None of the salmon stocks are currently listed as threatened or endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act, however salmon in the Chehalis Basin have seriously declined 50 to 80% due to overfishing, unregulated timber harvest, and habitat destruction. It is estimated that the Basin's spring run Chinook could be functionally extinct by the end of the century unless action is taken.

Chinook salmon from the Chehalis River are part of the Washington Coast stock which is listed as a priority stock for the endangered Southern Resident orcas, and satellite tagging has shown that Southern Resident orcas feed off Grays Harbor where the Chehalis River enters the Pacific Ocean.

Due to frequent and sometimes catastrophic flooding in the region, the Chehalis Basin Board is proposing the construction of a "flood retention facility" (dam) to mitigate the effects of floods. The proposed dam would drown 6 miles of critical salmon and steelhead habitat, result in increased temperature and decreased dissolved oxygen and would permanently eliminate many acres of habitat. It would only protect a small percentage of homes and businesses in the Chehalis Basin, primarily those located along the I-5 corridor. The proposed project requires both state and federal permits, and both of those processes are currently underway.



Illustration of proposed dam

FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, released a new policy in 2021 encouraging communities to use environmentally friendly features such as wetlands for flood protection instead of building sea walls and levees. This would be a preferred alternative for the Chehalis dam. Local non-dam alternatives could begin immediately, would protect residents throughout the Chehalis Basin, would provide local jobs instead of contracting out of state, and would help protect salmon runs throughout the basin.

In July 2020, Governor Inslee expressed concern about the construction of a dam and directed the Chehalis Basin Board to work with local tribes to develop non-dam alternatives. As a result, the Board created a Local Actions Non-Dam steering committee that is currently meeting to explore these alternatives.

Timeline:

- **May 2020** – Public comments accepted for the State Draft Environmental Impact Statement
- **November 2020** – Public comments accepted for the Federal Draft Environmental Impact Statement
- **May 20th, 2020** - Chehalis Basin Board votes to explore other options for flood reduction and mitigation
- **July 22nd, 2020** - Governor Inslee sends letters to Chehalis Basin Board and WA Departments of Ecology and Fish & Wildlife, directing them to pause the EIS process for the remainder of the year, and work with tribes to develop non-dam alternatives.
- **August 2021** – Final \$70 million budget approved by Chehalis Basin Board that includes funding to develop non-dam alternatives, in addition to continuing the process of considering and evaluating the construction of a dam.
- **2023** – Final Environmental Impact Statements due to be completed

Learn more at www.chehalisriveralliance.org and contact Cindy Hansen at cindy@orcانetwork.org with questions.



Chehalis Allies celebrating Orca Recovery Day at the Chehalis River