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Dixy Lee Ray
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DEPARTMENT OF GAME

Seattle Regional Office—509 Fairview Avenue North, Seattle 98109. Telephone: 464-7764

August 25, 1978

Dwain F. Hogan, P. E.
Chief, Planning Branch
Seattle District
Corps of Engineers
P. O. Box C-3755
Seattle, Washington 98124

Dear Mr. Hogan:

Thank you for your letter asking for our opinions and comments on your Skagit River levee and channel improvement project. In your July 27 letter you asked several specific questions. I understand Art Stendal and John Garrett of our staff have provided information concerning wildlife relationships and matters pertaining to our Skagit Wildlife Recreation Area. I will address my comments for game fish concerns.

We are not able to calculate game fish catches for your project area specifically nor are we in a position to provide escapement numbers. However, as you know, the Skagit River is one of the most important anadromous game fish rivers in the State of Washington. These runs are highly dependent on environmental conditions and qualities of Skagit River estuary. All pass through and may spend considerable time, during key life history phases, in the project area. We cannot overemphasize the importance of maintaining its ecological integrity. Channel modification or removal of riparian vegetation could severely impair important habitats and eliminate key food sources and cover habitat these fish depend on for survival.

Steelhead are the most intensively sought after and economically valuable game fish using the project area. In past years, more steelhead were harvested in Skagit River fisheries than from any other stream in Western Washington. Others, including sea-run cutthroat and Dolly Varden char, generate substantial additional value and public interest. Annual Skagit Basin steelhead catch, over past 16 seasons, has averaged 14,000. This harvest has ranged to over 22,000 during peak seasons under favorable survival conditions. Skagit Basin harvest stems from artificial and natural production. Both planted and naturally produced smolts are dependent on conditions in the project reach. We do not have total creel information for Dolly Varden and sea-run cutthroat but this harvest is significant and has considerable value.

Department of Game has substantial plans for enhancement and restoration of game fish resources of Skagit Basin. Present goals for our Barnaby-Harrison Slough facility include a 25 percent increase in winter-run steelhead and a sixfold increase in summer steelhead smolt production. We have recently developed a rearing facility on Sauk River to enhance late returning wild stock returns to that system. Collectively these plans, if successful, will more than double the total adult steelhead return to Skagit Basin. As you may be aware, existing hydroelectric developments in Skagit Basin are causing severe damages to

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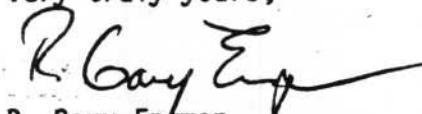
wild fish production. We are intensively seeking solutions to these problems. We cannot precisely forecast the level of increased production that could be realized through these measures but we expect it to be substantial. Success of all of these plans will depend on the maintenance and preservation of the biological integrity of the entire Skagit Basin and particularly your project reach. Migrant steelhead, Dolly Varden, and sea-run cutthroat depend heavily on this area. The intertidal estuarine zone of Skagit River is critical habitat for anadromous fish. Successful transition from fresh water to the marine environment is a key life history phase. Riparian vegetation, natural streambank and channel diversity provide important cover and food organism production that is directly related to the carrying capacity and ability of these environs to support these fish populations. Channel modification, streambank realignment, or riparian vegetation removal would have potentially severe negative impacts.

At this time, until I have had opportunity to review project plans in greater detail, I will not comment on project details such as buried or weighted levee toe or construction season. We are not aware of any steelhead spawning activity within your project reach.

Due to potentially severe biological impacts to the estuary-tidal zone, I recommend the North Fork channel modification feature be dropped. Levee configurations should be set back; riparian vegetation removal should be prevented.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to comment. I look forward to your meeting August 29.

Very truly yours,


R. Gary Engman
Wildlife Project Leader

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cc: Karen Mettling, Seattle District
Corps of Engineers

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