Testimony

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Madame Chairwoman and Members of the Committee,

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify today on the importance of stepping up the federal government's efforts to protect and restore Puget Sound, a threatened but vital estuary located at the western end of the United States-Canada border. I am the executive director of People For Puget Sound, a broad-based citizen organization working to protect and restore the Sound's health. In the 1980s I chaired the Puget Sound Water Quality Authority, a state agency created to develop and oversee the implementation of a basin-wide management plan for the Sound.

People For Puget Sound, which I helped establish in 1991, advocates for the policies, funding and legislation needed to protect the Sound; we mobilize thousands of volunteers to restore and steward habitat restoration sites; and we educate the public about the Sound, its wonders, and how each of us can contribute to its health.

Puget Sound is truly a magnificent national treasure. Its biological diversity, abundant fisheries, deep-water ports and strategic location on the Pacific Rim have provided great economic, cultural and ecological value to the nation, to Native American tribes, to the state and to the millions of residents of the region.

Unfortunately, historical and current pollution, mismanagement of fish and wildlife, and unchecked development have damaged Puget Sound's health to the point where its iconic species—chinook salmon and orca whales—are on the brink of extinction, and the Sound's valuable shellfishery has retreated to the few remaining unpolluted parts of the Sound. Seventy-five percent of the Sound's original salt marshes have been destroyed. Nearly every urban bay, and some rural ones too, are Superfund toxic sites. Recreation, tourism, human health and the region's economy and quality of life are all at stake.

The state and federal government have not sat idly by while this tragedy unfolds, but clearly, much more needs to be done—soon—if Puget Sound is to survive as a productive estuary. Beginning in the 1980s, there have been serious efforts to address the Sound's decline. In 1986, the state adopted a management plan for the Sound, which became a model for the National Estuary Program, of which Puget Sound has been a part since that time. But a combined local, state and federal failure to adequately implement this plan has led to continued slippage in the Sound's condition.

In 2005, the governor launched a new, reinvigorated effort to save the Sound, focusing on action and implementation, with the goal of restoring Puget Sound to health by the year 2020. The new Puget Sound Partnership is the agency created by the 2007 legislature to achieve this goal, working with federal, tribal, local and non-governmental partners.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has been a player since the 1980s in the effort to save the Sound. But candidly, their attention to the Sound has ebbed and flowed as regional administrators have come and gone, and as national priorities have shifted around. In the 1980s EPA had an office focused on the Sound, which faded away. Now, thankfully, EPA is stepping up to the plate again, and has the potential to do much more.

Puget Sound is a long way from Washington, DC. It may not be obvious from here why the federal government should do more for our estuary by creating a Puget Sound program office in EPA. From our vantage point out there, the challenge is to overcome the obstacles to implementing a solid plan for the Sound, made even more daunting by expected effects on the Sound from both continued population growth and climate change. We need a long-term, sustainable, accountable, well-funded effort with clear deadlines and a laser focus on results rather than on planning and process. We need all the help we can get.

But why is this a priority for national attention? Puget Sound needs and merits additional national focus and involvement for at least three reasons:

1. The Puget Sound is part of an international marine ecosystem. Working in from the Pacific Ocean, the international border runs right down the middle of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, threads through the San Juan and Gulf Islands, and hits the mainland just south of the Fraser River, by far the largest river flowing into the international Sound and Straits area. Neither the water nor the wildlife pay any attention to this boundary. Untreated sewage from Victoria, British Columbia spews out into the

Strait of Juan de Fuca. "Our" orca whales cross the border multiple times almost every day this time of year, eating salmon of both nationalities. Oil spills hit both sides, regardless of where they start. EPA has played in important role in maintaining open lines of communication across the border, where Canadian federal agencies are key players. Over time, it is going to become increasingly important for the US and Canada to address Puget Sound issues together. I don't see this happening in an effective, sustainable way without more emphasis on the US side from the federal level.

2. The federal government is a major player in Puget Sound, through its military installations, National Parks and Wildlife Refuges, and National Forests. There literally can be no comprehensive approach to the protection and restoration of the Sound without the full cooperation and participation of the federal government. It goes without saying that federal agencies' policies and programs are crucial to the Sound, from the Corps of Engineers' permitting responsibility to the US Geological Survey's scientific studies, but the extraordinary amount of direct ownership and activity makes it essential for EPA's Puget Sound role to be sustained at a high level. EPA has taken the initiative to coordinate federal agencies in their relationship to the Puget Sound Partnership, but there is a need to do much more.

3. Puget Sound's federally-listed endangered species are at the heart of the matter. Southern Resident orca whales, Puget Sound chinook salmon, Puget Sound steelhead, bull trout, and Hood Canal chum salmon are all federally-listed species. Their fate is the fate of Puget Sound itself. In listing these species, the federal government has taken on a special responsibility for their recovery. For all of these species, the recovery plan is essentially to save the Sound. There is no one management action—like saving a specific piece of land—that will do the job. So elevating EPA's role and responsibility is one way of addressing the federal role and interest in endangered species. I might add that there are many other species in severely depleted condition in the Sound. Heightening the federal role in saving the Sound could prevent the need for some of these species to be listed in the future.

I am acutely aware that recovering major ecosystems to health is not easy, even when they are blessed with high-level attention and plentiful resources. But I do know that we don't have a chance if we don't give it our best shot. Part of that best effort is to equip and direct the EPA to increase its level of leadership and responsibility, and to sustain its involvement over the long haul.

Thank you very much. I would be pleased to answer questions or provide additional information.