



Chinook salmon, U.S. Fish & Wildlife

## Relentless Salmon & Steelhead Advocacy

This year, IRU has continued to advocate for the recovery of abundant wild salmon and steelhead runs in Idaho via a river restoration plan that includes Lower Snake River dams breaching and replacement of services. IRU remains steadfast in our belief that Idahoans and Northwesterners can have a reliable, clean energy grid, strong agricultural communities, increased resiliency in the face of climate change, and abundant runs of wild salmon and steelhead.

Throughout the year, as a plaintiff in the long-running litigation surrounding salmon, our organization witnessed momentum build in mediated talks with the federal government during a litigation stay. Over the summer, the White House’s Council on Environmental Quality issued a request for information related to regional salmon recovery and restoration of the Lower Snake River. Alongside our partner organizations, we helped drive over 80,000 public comments from citizens across the country demanding salmon recovery commitments that include breaching the Lower Snake River and services replacement. In the fall, a Presidential Memorandum reiterated this Administration’s commitment to recovering abundant salmon populations in the region and upholding long ignored Tribal treaties and trust obligations with the federal government. Anything less than a comprehensive, government-wide approach to salmon recovery in the region, in collaboration with state and Tribal governments, is clearly inadequate going forward.

Crucial to securing significant changes to the hydrosystem poses an existential threat to migrating fish, is the full cooperation of federal agencies such as Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) and the Army Corps of Engineers. This year, IRU engaged with BPA in particular – calling for the agency to uphold their mandate to provide equitable treatment of fish and wildlife alongside ratemaking and power sales – by driving public comments and emails to BPA and when necessary.

At the grassroots level, IRU organized documentary film screenings of *The Lost Salmon* and the *Covenant of the Salmon People* across the state, and we spoke to guides and outfitters at events such as the River Rendezvous in Stanley before their summer season on the water educating the public on salmon recovery.

Looking ahead to 2024, IRU will continue to relentlessly push for urgent action from our decision makers and federal government around transitioning the region away from the four Lower Snake River dams. We’ll highlight the plight of our salmon and steelhead and the challenges that warming rivers present. Finally, we’ll continue to follow the lead of Tribal Nations in fighting for the recovery of abundant wild salmon and steelhead populations, alongside our partner organizations across the Northwest.



Vahn Vongvilay, Salmon Fest

## Stopping Mining Threats to Idaho Watersheds

The mining industry continues to have its sights set on Idaho and the mineral reserves underneath the mountain peaks that bring us joy and respite in the wild. This year, our team has stayed diligent on pushing back against familiar projects while monitoring new explorations on the horizon. The mining industry continues to shift its messaging of these projects presenting them as solutions to emerging technology and a transition away from fossil fuels. IRU remains steadfast in our mission to protect the rivers of Idaho that provide one of the most critical resources that we have – clean water.

Early in 2023, Idaho Rivers United, along with our coalition partners, submitted comments on the Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Stibnite Gold Project, threatening the South Fork of the Salmon River watershed. Our primary concerns have centered on the detrimental impacts this gold mine would have on anadromous fish populations, water quality, and questionable claims regarding reclamation. The Forest Service is scheduled to release its response this winter, ushering in the next opportunity for public engagement.

IRU additionally submitted comments on Stibnite’s draft permit under section 404 of the Clean Water Act as well as groundwater monitoring compliance sites permitted through the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality.

Most recently, the CuMo exploration project at the headwaters of Grimes Creek, a major tributary of the Boise River, returned as the Forest Service announced that a new Plan of Operations has been submitted for review. After several years without updates, this is the third iteration of this project that poses a massive threat to clean water and one of Boise’s primary drinking water sources. The company has published plans that they intend to turn this project into one of the largest open-pit mines in the world. While still in early exploration, IRU will continue to mobilize our members and the public to fight this project at every opportunity.

In September, IRU and partners welcomed the positive news that the Biden-Harris Administration’s Department of the Interior-led Interagency Working Group on Mining Laws, Regulations, and Permitting released its final report. This long overdue report proposed several recommendations to update and reform the archaic 1872 Mining Law that has disabled federal agencies as they evaluate, and ultimately permit, hard rock mining on public lands.

While still falling short in several areas and requiring congressional action to implement many recommendations, IRU is pleased to see a strong emphasis on environmental justice, Tribal consultation, and a potential plan to finally require companies to pay for the resources they extract through a royalty and leasing program.

IRU doesn’t foresee the mining industry losing interest in Idaho extraction any time soon, and remains deeply committed to this work. With your support, we will continue to show up, fight, and secure meaningful wins that protect Idaho’s rivers, lakes, and fisheries.

## Creating an Inclusive & Equitable River Legacy

**We believe that rivers unite us. IRU is dedicated to ensuring a legacy of clean, free-flowing rivers with healthy fisheries and ecosystems for all – now and forever. We are working to ensure authentic participation by sharing power, recognition, resources, and by amplifying the voices of people who are most vulnerable to the impacts of water and environmental policy and regulation. We will continue our work to help make the river community a safe place for everyone and welcome all voices into the realm of river conservation and advocacy.**

**Our organization is looking forward to sharing our new strategic plan with members and the public, coming out in 2024. IRU’s conservation campaigns rely on your support through membership, gift giving, and using your voice as a river advocate. We appreciate your support and wish you and your community a healthy and joyful coming year. Thank you for joining us. *For our rivers!***



Vahn Vongvilay, Shoshone Bannock Tribal dancers at Salmon Fest



# ANNUAL REPORT 2023

*To protect & restore the rivers and fisheries of Idaho*



IRU’s Lower Salmon River trip, Nic Nelson

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## A Message from the Executive Director

The largest dam removal project in history is occurring in the Pacific Northwest. Thousands of river miles are being considered for Wild and Scenic designation. And for the first time ever, the President has decreed that all federal agencies prioritize the restoration of healthy and abundant wild salmon and steelhead to the Columbia River Basin.

Every day, I am privileged to roll up my sleeves and work with my colleagues on protecting and restoring Idaho’s most incredible resource – our rivers. My job gives me a front row seat to witness the progress we’ve made toward our serious and ambitious goals. But as I reflect on the biggest wins that IRU was a part of this past year, many have come outside our great State. River conservation in Idaho faces significant political headwinds and the nature and scope of our work continues to become more complex. We are working through a moment in conservation unlike any other, with a more polarized political landscape and a continued nationwide reckoning on social injustice and unfulfilled treaty rights.

Yet what is so great about IRU is our people. Our members, volunteers, and advocates have propelled us to be better. In 2024, we will unveil the latest iteration of our strategic plan, and through it, we will showcase not only our resilience in these unprecedented times, but our adaptability to unite every river and conservation community, engaging each person who cherishes Idaho’s waters – those whose minds drift longingly to the next set of rapids or dance at the notion of netting a native trout. We embrace the belief that being more welcoming and inclusive will not only make our voice stronger, but will make us a more effective organization in affecting long-term change.

As 2024 approaches, I’m filled with immense optimism. Optimism that we will have a permanent resolution to the decades long fight to recover wild salmon; optimism that we will finally see Wild and Scenic protections for the North Fork Payette and Lower Salmon; and optimism because IRU, throughout our history, has seen opportunities, where others have seen barriers – adventure where others see challenge.

We will succeed, because as Loren Easley once said,

“If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water.”

Nic Nelson, IRU Executive Director



## 2023 River Conservation Milestones

**Grassroots Action:** Through IRU’s conservation advocacy and work, the public submitted tens of thousands of comments nationwide to advance salmon and steelhead restoration, and hundreds more to oppose harmful mining projects across the state. Our conservation staff also submitted hundreds of pages of technical comments to state and federal agencies.

**Advocacy & Outreach:** IRU volunteers helped launch new programs to protect our rivers and watersheds across the state. In partnership with the U.S. Forest Service, IRU trained seven Sawtooth Salmon Stewards to spread awareness about the critical salmon habitat in the Salmon River. The Urban River Stewardship program was developed to connect residents to their local rivers and surrounding communities. Through the program, five water quality surveys were completed and 70 hours were dedicated to collecting litter on the Boise River Greenbelt. This year, IRU also created a River Ambassadors Program to broaden our reach into river communities across the region.

We are honored to work with our conservation-minded business partners, local schools, and other organizations who share the same goals for river and fisheries stewardship. IRU looks forward to creating a lasting legacy of healthy, free-flowing rivers for generations to come.

230  
IRU volunteers  
completed 650  
hours of work  
across the state

600+ pages  
of technical  
comments that IRU  
staff helped write  
to management  
agencies

1  
*Practitioner’s Guide  
to Hydropower  
Dam Removal*  
published

1,500+  
cumulated number  
of IRU staff river  
miles in 2023

350 pages of  
comments  
submitted to  
oppose the  
Stibnite Gold  
Project

6,000+  
in-person attendees  
at IRU advocacy  
events,  
& 300 youth  
engagements

18 meetings with  
Members of  
Congress or their  
staff

130 donating  
business partners  
to IRU in 2023

Jeff Ever Osborne



## BOARD

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Boise/Stamley

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John Webster, North Fork of the Payette River

## Wild & Scenic River Designation Focus: the Lower Salmon & North Fork Payette Rivers

Wild and Scenic river designations are the best avenue to secure permanent federal protection for our beloved rivers. Idaho has over 100,000 river miles, yet less than one percent of Idaho’s river miles are safeguarded under the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act. Idaho is long overdue in its efforts to establish protections for rivers that possess outstanding and remarkable values, with the last designation being the Owyhee Canyonlands in 2009.

IRU’s goal is to double the number of river miles in Idaho that are protected under the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act in the next five years. In the near term, our highest priority rivers for designation are the Lower Salmon River and the North Fork of the Payette River, both incredibly deserving for their unique and outstanding values.

The remarkable Lower Salmon River stretches from Vinegar Creek to its confluence with the Snake River. Over 20 years ago, Congress found the Lower Salmon to be eligible for Wild and Scenic protection, and subsequent studies found it to be suitable for designation. Yet the process remains incomplete.

This river corridor is rich in history as it flows through traditional Nimipuu lands. Hundreds of cultural and historical sites can be found along the Lower Salmon, including one of the oldest archaeological sites containing evidence of human occupation over 16,000 years ago. This final portion of one of the longest undammed rivers in North America also provides critical habitat for Endangered Species Act-listed anadromous salmonids and supports other native fish species such as white sturgeon, westslope cutthroat trout, redband trout, and lamprey. This year, we have collaborated with the Nez Perce Tribe, as well as our partners American Rivers and American Whitewater, to bring the goals of this campaign to fruition.

IRU also believes the North Fork of the Payette River deserves permanent protection. This river has already been found eligible for designation under the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act, and in July, we relaunched our campaign to seek permanent protections. This section of the Payette River offers runs ranging from legendary Class V whitewater to stretches suitable for families and scenic floats.

Anyone who has spent any time along these two rivers can attest that the values they provide making them more than deserving of permanent protection. Our Wild and Scenic river conservation campaign will continue to focus on these two rivers, and by partnering with Tribes, recreationists, and elected officials, our goal is to see them designated by 2028.



Power County Idaho wind farm, Northwest Energy Coalition



Lower Granite Dam on the Snake River, EcoFlight

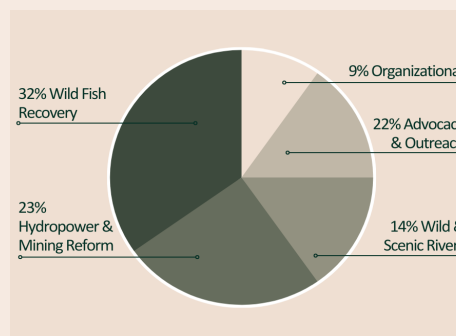
## Hydropower Reform

In 2023, the largest dam removal effort in U.S. history commenced as four large dams on the Klamath River began to be removed and a river restored. While IRU played only a small role in this campaign, our work through the Hydropower Reform Coalition certainly contributed to this momentous occasion. Moreover, we now have a working blueprint for when the four Lower Snake River dams are removed.

This past year was an incredibly busy and successful one for our hydropower reform work. We briefed numerous members of Congress, agencies, and partners regarding greenhouse gas emissions from hydropower projects; we helped co-author a guide to engaging in the FERC process for our stakeholder partners; and we helped stop numerous, river altering projects (such as Cat Creek Energy’s pumped storage project on the South Fork Boise River) from coming to fruition.

We look ahead to the coming year(s) and see opportunities abound to restore rivers constricted by aging and archaic dams throughout Idaho and the Pacific Northwest. We see a recognition by the public and our energy policy makers of the effects of the hydrosystem on climate change, including its contribution to greenhouse gas emissions. But most importantly, we see more rivers permanently protected in their free-flowing state, for each subsequent generation to enjoy.

## Your Investment at Work



## 2023 Annual Award Recipients

IRU’s annual awards recognize outstanding partners, members, and businesses who further IRU’s mission and campaigns. We proudly present this year’s winners and are honored to work with you all.

**Salmon Advocate of the Year:** Nez Perce Tribe

**Member of the Year:** Jean Nielsen

**Business Partner of the Year:** ROW Adventures

**Water Protection Advocate:** Daniel Stillman

**Conservation Partner of the Year:** Earthworks