United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 2, 2011

The Honorable Barbara A. Mikulski, Chairwoman
Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
142 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kay Bailey Hutchinson, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
142 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Mikulski and Hutchison:

The threat of a potentially devastating infectious salmon virus needs an immediate federal response. We are writing to urge you to marshal the resources we need to prioritize Infectious Salmon Anemia (ISA) research, surveillance, outreach, and mitigation measures across the Pacific Northwest and develop a response plan. At risk are healthy salmon populations which are the foundation for tens of thousands of jobs and billions of dollars of economic activity throughout the West Coast. Besides the two infected sockeye salmon found in Rivers Inlet, there are now additional reports that a wild adult coho salmon found in a tributary of the Fraser River showed signs of infectious salmon anemia disease.

One recent study of Pacific salmon estimated the wholesale value of the annual catch at least $2.2 billion dollars, supporting 35,000 harvesting and processing jobs. Yet this is only a small piece of the economic value of salmon fisheries to the Pacific Northwest. The annual commercial and recreational salmon harvests employ boat builders, outfitters, recreational fishing industry, gear manufacturers, hatcheries, and a myriad of other jobs. With so much at stake, a rapidly spreading virus that causes disease in wild Pacific salmon could be economically and ecologically devastating.

We are seriously concerned that NOAA and other key federal agencies need an immediate response plan. While a few scientists may downplay the threat to wild Pacific salmon posed by the ISA infections recently detected in British Columbia, we believe the lessons learned from other recent fish disease outbreaks suggest that ISA should be cause for considerable concern now. For instance the same virus virtually wiped out whole aquaculture industries in Chile and Norway, and that it can take as few as two fish to start an irreversible and devastating chain reaction throughout the population. In fact, the economically disastrous Viral Hemorrhagic

Septicemia fish disease outbreak in the Great Lakes in 2007 began with the detection of only two infected fish.

With some wild salmon populations already endangered and many others under considerable stress, now is not the time to ignore the precautionary principle; the risks are too great. We have been in contact with federal, state, and tribal scientists and fishery management officials ever since ISA was detected in wild Pacific salmon. It is clear that interagency coordination is essential to understanding the virus and to our ability to respond quickly and effectively to stop its spread. That is why our bipartisan legislation, which passed the Senate yesterday, requires the National Aquatic Animal Health Task Force (an existing partnership between USDA, USGS, NOAA and others) to report to Congress within 6 months on the research, interagency coordination, and response measures necessary to nip this problem in the bud.

To that end, we urge NOAA to undertake the following actions:

- U.S. independently confirm the presence of ISA in British Columbia. We urge the U.S. government to obtain samples from the two infected sockeye and run independent diagnostic tests to confirm the presence of the ISA virus in British Columbia. We should not rely on another government -- particularly one that may have a motive to misrepresent its findings-- to determine how we assess the risk ISA may pose to American fishery jobs.

- Evaluate and bolster our surveillance and monitoring framework. Early detection is critical to responding and curtailing any potential future outbreaks. Improved interagency coordination is needed to identify coverage gaps, establish communication and response plans, and outline future resource needs.

- Measure ISA susceptibility among different populations and species of wild salmon in the North Pacific. Understanding which populations and species are susceptible to ISA will allow us to maximize surveillance dollars by focusing our efforts on populations most at risk. Surveillance efforts should be prioritized to assess the most economically valuable populations first.

- Develop essential action plans to respond to ISA. Hopefully this virus will not spread or cause disease among wild salmon populations. However, we need to be prepared to quickly respond if the virus spreads quickly within or across populations and species. We need federal management strategies in place to address any ISA outbreaks in both wild and aquaculture populations, including securing water supplies at conservation hatcheries.

- Integrate ISA monitoring into existing outreach programs to protect the seafood industry. ISA does not pose a threat to human health. However, we need to be sure that the news of ISA does not cause consumer uncertainty.

- Protect current salmon restoration programs. Responding to ISA should not come at the expense of NOAA meeting its statutory requirements under the Mitchell Act and the Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund, which are critical to habitat restoration, research and conservation of Pacific salmon species. It would be shortsighted to divert critical salmon funds from these programs when the threat of ISA only renews the need to bolster pacific salmon recovery, not impede it.

We sincerely hope that the recent detection of ISA in Pacific salmon turns out to be a false alarm. However, waiting for even more red flags to appear would be irresponsible. We know that ISA has catastrophically impacted salmon industries around the world, costing tens of thousands of jobs abroad, and that the virus is virtually impossible to eradicate once it has spread within an area. We urge you to act now to prevent a similar catastrophic outbreak in the salmon populations of the Pacific Northwest.

We look forward to working with you on this important matter.

Sincerely,

Senator Maria Cantwell

Senator Lisa Murkowski

Senator Mark Begich