



MEMORANDUM

January 26, 2024

TO: Members of the Subcommittee on Energy, Climate, and Grid Security

FROM: Committee Majority Staff

RE: Hearing entitled “Exposing President Biden’s Plan to Dismantle the Snake River Dams and the Negative Impacts to the United States”

I. INTRODUCTION

On Tuesday, January 30, 2024, at 10:00 a.m. (ET) in 2123 Rayburn House Office Building, the Subcommittee on Energy, Climate, and Grid Security will hold a hearing entitled “Exposing President Biden’s Plan to Dismantle the Snake River Dams and the Negative Impacts to the United States.” The hearing will examine the management and operations of federal dams on the Columbia River and its tributaries, and actions taken by the Biden administration to plan for the removal of the Lower Snake River dams.

II. WITNESSES

Panel I

- **Brenda Mallory**, Chair, Council on Environmental Quality;
- **John Hairston**, Administrator and CEO, Bonneville Power Administration;
- **Michael L. Connor**, Assistant Secretary of the Army (Civil Works), U.S. Army;
- **Janet Coit**, Assistant Administrator for Fisheries, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; and,
- **Jeremiah Baumann**, Senior Advisor, Director of Policy and Implementation, Office of the Secretary, U.S. Department of Energy.

Panel II

- **Jim Matheson**, CEO, National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA);
- **Casey Chumrau**, CEO, Washington Grain Commission;
- **Neil Maunu**, Executive Director, Pacific Northwest Waterways Association (PNWA); and,
- **Jeremy Takala**, Member, Yakama Nation’s Tribal Council.

III. BACKGROUND

The Columbia River Basin

The Columbia River Basin drainage system encompasses about 250,000 square miles, extending throughout the Pacific Northwest and into Canada. There are more than 250 reservoirs and around 150 hydroelectric projects in the basin, including 18 mainstem dams on the Columbia River and its main tributary, the Snake River.

The dams throughout the Columbia River basin serve several primary uses, including flood control, irrigation, navigation, and hydropower production. The Columbia River Basin's dams are owned by both public and private entities. Beginning in the early 1900s, the federal government built 29 major dams on the Columbia River and its tributaries as indicated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1
Columbia River Basin Dams



Source: [U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Northwestern Division](#)

Hydropower Production

Nearly 70 percent of hydropower capacity of the facilities in the basin are owned and operated by the federal government through the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR). The electricity generated at these units is transported and marketed by the federal Bonneville Power Administration (BPA). Another 19 percent of the basin's hydroelectric capacity is owned and operated by municipally owned utilities, including the 1,040-megawatt (MW) Boundary plant owned by the city of Seattle.

A significant amount of hydroelectric power generated in the Northwest is consumed by California customers. In the late 1960s, BPA constructed two 500-kilovolt transmission lines capable of carrying power from the Pacific Northwest to the Los Angeles area. The Pacific Northwest-Southwest intertie was completed in 1971, giving Los Angeles consumers access to hydroelectric power originating from the Pacific Northwest.¹

Federal dams in the U.S. Columbia River Basin generate, on average in a year, 8,664 megawatts of electricity, or enough power for approximately 4,938,480 average homes (at 570 homes per megawatt) or nearly eight cities the size of Seattle. Non-federal dams in the Columbia River Basin produce, on average in a year, 5,368 megawatts, or enough electricity for approximately 3,059,760 homes or nearly five Seattles.² The largest U.S. hydropower facility, and the largest U.S. electric power plant in electric generation capacity, is the Grand Coulee hydro dam on the Columbia River in Washington State, with 6,765 MW total generation capacity.³

Flood Control, Irrigation, and Navigation

There are multiple, additional uses of the Columbia River system, including flood control, navigation of boats and barges, irrigation, recreation, and fish and wildlife habitat. Historically, the Columbia River Basin has been subject to severe floods. Controlling flood waters was one of the original purposes of the dams and remains a high priority. With the construction of dams, locks, and channels, boats and barges can navigate the Columbia and Snake Rivers nearly 500 miles from the Pacific Ocean, enabling the import and export of commodities essential to the nation's economy. For example, an estimated 10 percent of total annual U.S. wheat exports produced in 11 states pass through the four locks and dams on the Snake River between Lewiston, the most inland port in the nation, and its confluence with the Columbia River.⁴ Growers in arid parts of eastern Washington, northeastern Oregon, and southern Idaho depend on water from the Columbia River system to produce wheat, corn, potatoes, peas, alfalfa, apples, grapes, and an assortment of crops.⁵

¹ *Id.*

² See [Northwest Power and Conservation Council](#).

³ U.S. Energy Information Administration. *Electricity generation, capacity, and sales in the United States*.

⁴ See U.S. Wheat Associates. *Facts About U.S. Wheat Exports And The Columbia Snake River System*.

⁵ See Bonneville Power Administration, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, *The Columbia River System Inside Story* for additional background on the construction of dams and operations of the Columbia River System.

Fish Migration

The Columbia River system is home to 13 species of salmon and steelhead listed for protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) that migrate from freshwater rivers to the ocean and back to spawn. The ESA requires federal agencies to ensure that their actions are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of a listed species, nor result in the destruction or adverse modification of designated critical habitat. The actions of agencies that operate the federal Columbia River system are guided by a document known as a biological opinion that establishes a plan and sets various standards for management of endangered fish species.⁶

Federal Agency Oversight and Management of the Columbia River System

Numerous state and federal agencies are involved in planning and operations of the Columbia River System. The USACE and the BOR own and operate the federal water projects on the Columbia and its tributaries. The BPA markets the power generated from the federal projects and distributes power from federal and non-federal projects through its transmission system. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is responsible for the protection of endangered and threatened migratory fish native to the Columbia River basin. The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) oversees and guides implementation of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) across the federal government. CEQ also convenes federal agencies and stakeholders to mediate disputes concerning environmental policy.

Value of the Snake River Dams to the Nation

The Snake River is the principal tributary to the Columbia River, draining approximately 107,000 square miles in Washington, Idaho, Oregon, Wyoming, Utah and Nevada. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the federal government built four large dams on the Snake River: Ice Harbor, Lower Monumental, Little Goose, and Lower Granite.

The USACE's Walla Walla District owns and operates the four lower Snake River dams, all of which are multiple-use facilities that provide navigation, hydropower, recreation, and fish and wildlife conservation benefits.

Because of their locations, size, and ability to help meet peak power loads, these four dams do much more than generate energy – they are key to keeping the electricity system reliable and helping to meet its multiple uses – including supporting wind energy. The Snake River dams lie east of the other federal generators, so they provide a significant technical contribution to transmission grid reliability.

The Lower Snake River system of locks and dams delivers a significant economic benefit to the nation. Barging on the inland Columbia Snake River System moves, on average, approximately 10 million tons of cargo valued at over \$3 billion each year. Forty percent of the Nation's wheat transits through this system.⁷

⁶ See NOAA Fisheries, [Federal Columbia River Power System Biological Opinion](#).

⁷ See U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Walla Walla District, [Lower Snake River Dams – A Value to the Nation](#)

Current Fish Passage at the Lower Snake River Projects

The four lower Snake River dams were designed with features to aid the migration of both juvenile and adult fish. In the last 25 years, USACE has consistently investigated and adopted new technologies for maximizing the survival of juvenile and adult fish. Juvenile fish survival past the dams has increased through extensive dam modifications, such as surface passage, juvenile bypass systems, and more effective and efficient spill operations.

Through their turbine improvement program, USACE has made improvements to turbine design and modified operations to improve fish survival through the turbines. For adult fish returning from the Pacific Ocean to spawn, fish ladders and devices to attract fish to the entrances of the ladders are the primary aid to their passing the dams. Fish ladders have been in place since the dams were built in the 1960s and early 1970s. Improvements to these ladders have been made at all four dams. Overall, these improvements are making a positive impact on salmon and steelhead returns.⁸

Efforts to Remove the Lower Snake River Dams

For nearly 30 years, a coalition of environmental groups and tribal organizations have challenged the federal government's management plans for the Columbia River system's dams and hydropower facilities in federal court. During that time, multiple presidential administrations have reviewed and revised operating plans to avoid jeopardizing endangered or threatened fish.

On March 28, 2022, CEQ published a blog post entitled, "Columbia River Basin Fisheries: Working Together to Develop a Path Forward," in which CEQ indicated it had convened nation-to-nation consultation between federal agencies and leaders and representatives from the Tribes of the Columbia River Basin to discuss the impact of the Columbia-Snake River System on Pacific Salmon. The blog post also indicated the Biden administration had convened an interagency group to "identify a durable path forward that ensures a clean energy future, supports local and regional economies, and restores ecosystem function, while honoring longstanding commitments to Tribal Nations."⁹

As part of this blog post, CEQ also announced it had engaged the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS) to "facilitate a transparent and productive public policy dialogue with all of the sovereigns and stakeholders in the region," and further invited members of the public to share information.¹⁰

On December 14, 2023, the Biden administration announced that it had filed an agreement in the Federal District Court in Oregon, establishing commitments made by the Federal government and implemented through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) among

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Council on Environmental Quality. [Columbia River Basin Fisheries: Working Together to Develop a Path Forward.](#)

¹⁰ *Id.*

the United States; the States of Oregon and Washington; the Nez Perce, Umatilla, Warm Springs, and Yakama Tribes; and environmental non-profit organizations.¹¹

The Biden administration's MOU would spend more than \$1 billion in preparation for breaching the four Lower Snake River dams, although only Congress may authorize the removal of the dams.¹² The commitments contained in the MOU include providing funding, conducting studies, and planning for removal of the Lower Snake River dams and replacement of resources and benefits those facilities provide. The MOU contains significant Department of Energy funding commitments to the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon, and the Nez Perce Tribe to deploy "clean, renewable, socially-just energy resources" to serve as "replacement" power for the Lower Snake River dams. The MOU also commits federal funding and technical assistance to support replacement and enhancement of transportation, irrigation, and recreation services provided by the dams.

IV. ISSUES

The following issues may be examined at the hearing:

- The economic benefits of the Columbia River System and the Lower Snake River dams to the nation;
- The multiple uses of the Columbia River System, including clean hydroelectric power, navigation and transportation, irrigation, flood control, and recreation; and,
- The actions taken by the Biden administration to plan for the removal of the Lower Snake River dams.

V. STAFF CONTACTS

If you have any questions regarding this hearing, please contact Elise Krekorian, Brandon Mooney, or Mary Martin of the Committee staff.

¹¹ See Memorandum of Understanding filed on December 14, 2023. Available [here](#)

¹² *Id.*