

Committee on Energy and Commerce

**Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Subcommittee on Energy, Climate, and Grid Security
Ranking Member Diana DeGette**

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

January 30, 2024

Thank you, Chairman Duncan. The Pacific Northwest is home to the Columbia River Basin. And the Columbia River Basin is home to 13 species of salmon and steelhead that are listed as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act. The principal tributary of the Columbia River – the Snake River – houses four large dams constructed by the federal government in the 60’s and early 70’s. Construction and operation of the dams, private dam building, and population growth have negatively impacted wild fish populations. This has led to years of litigation and court rulings which have found operation of these dams violates the Endangered Species Act. In addition, historically low numbers of fish harm the federal government’s treaty responsibilities to Tribal Nations, who depend on the Columbia River Basin’s fish supply.

Fish are integral to the culture, economy, and way of life for Tribal Nations in the region. And the U.S. has a responsibility to support their rights. So why am I setting this stage? Why are we holding this hearing? Our committee has oversight responsibilities over our nation’s energy sector. The Snake River dams provide energy for the U.S. via hydropower, which supplies a significant amount of power to the region. This power, transported and marketed by the federal Bonneville Power Administration, is vital to millions in the west. But valid court challenges intended to protect and allow for fish repopulation have resulted in the reduction of hydropower generation. So, we find ourselves being pulled in multiple different directions to ensure that we can live up to our commitments under our treaty obligations and the Endangered Species Act, all while providing the Pacific Northwest with abundant clean power.

I think I speak for everyone here when I say that energy security and reliability are of utmost importance to this subcommittee. And we cannot afford to risk the uncertainty that would come from upholding the status quo and allowing for 10 more years of litigation. This is why I’m thankful the Biden Administration has prioritized finding a solution to this difficult situation. The Biden Administration has brought together the states of Oregon and Washington with four Native Tribes – known collectively as the Six Sovereigns – to charter a path forward for the Pacific Northwest and the Columbia River system. The historic agreement, announced last December, provides for a 10-year stay of litigation to provide much needed stability for the region. It will also allow the region time to invest in a clear path forward that considers the needs of relevant states, Tribal Nations, and stakeholders. As part of the agreement, the Biden Administration will bring more than \$1 billion in federal investments to the Columbia River Basin.

These investments will restore salmon, steelhead, and other native fish populations, while also supporting the development of one to three gigawatts of Tribally sponsored clean energy projects. Part of the agreement also includes creating a PNW Tribal Energy Program within the Department of Energy.

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This program would support the Six Sovereigns in identifying resources provided by IRA and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to support the development of their own clean energy resources. Through this agreement, the Biden Administration made commitments to strengthen our relationship with Tribal Nations, restore wild fish populations, and invest in clean energy. This is an action plan that I support over the uncertainty of the alternative we have watched play out over the last 20 years. The future of the Columbia River Basin is already better off because of the partnership the U.S. and the Six Sovereigns have established. Because hydropower is an important resource that is vital to our transition to clean energy, and this agreement will prevent continued litigation from chipping away at energy generation in the region.

Hopefully this incredibly complicated situation can be resolved in a way that maximizes clean energy generation, while protecting endangered species and honoring our treaty obligations to Native American Tribes. Now, my colleagues on the other side of the aisle are attempting to falsely assert that the agreement calls for the removal of the dams, while providing no alternative solutions that are supported by the many stakeholders that deserve a seat at the table. Here's the reality: This agreement reasserts that only Congress can authorize the removal of the Snake River dams. It doesn't mandate us to do anything. So I would be interested in a hearing that looks into what action Congress should take – a hearing grounded in reality. Not one that relies on misinformation and fearmongering which is what I fear this hearing will devolve into. I yield back.