

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY

COMPLETE STATEMENT OF

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BEFORE

**COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENERGY, CLIMATE, AND GRID SECURITY
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

ON

OPERATIONS OF THE COLUMBIA RIVER SYSTEM

JANUARY 30, 2024

Chairwoman Rodgers, Chairman Duncan, Ranking Member DeGette, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today to discuss the operations of the Columbia River System.

I am Michael Connor, Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works. In my role, I oversee and provide direction in the Department of the Army for all aspects of the Civil Works program of the United States Army Corps of Engineers (Corps).

The Corps has three main mission areas, which are: flood and storm damage reduction, commercial navigation, and aquatic ecosystem restoration. In the watershed of the Columbia River, the Congress authorized the Corps and the Bureau of Reclamation to construct, operate, and maintain 14 Columbia River System projects for multiple specified purposes. The purposes of these multiple-use projects include, but are not limited to, commercial navigation and hydropower production. The Congress authorized the Bonneville Power Administration to market and transmit the power generated by the coordinated system operations of these projects.

Impacts to ecosystems and native species from these projects and other actions in the watershed have been a contentious issue in the region for decades. In late 2020 and early 2021, plaintiffs filed complaints in the Oregon district and the Ninth Circuit courts challenging the decisions of the Corps, Bureau of Reclamation, Bonneville Power Administration, National Marine Fisheries Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The United States negotiated a stay of the district court litigation in 2021 so that the parties could work collaboratively on addressing basin-wide solutions that could resolve the litigation. This collaboration resulted in an agreement signed on December 13, 2023, which builds a foundation for renewing and growing a partnership with Oregon, Washington, and the Columbia River Treaty Tribes, which have been deeply involved in the mediation, and others across the region who are looking to partner with the United States on this issue.

Overall, the Corps will be an important partner in a comprehensive, whole of government approach to restore Columbia River Basin salmon and other native fish populations; honor federal commitments to Tribal Nations and build resilience in the region to the ongoing impacts of climate change, consistent with the authorized purposes of these projects and applicable law. The Columbia River System projects also provide benefits to the energy and transportation sectors of the region. As part of the agreement to stay the litigation, the U.S. Government will adjust the operations of the Federal dams to deliver a net-benefit for fish, while supporting commercial navigation and grid reliability, and meeting health and safety requirements. While the agreement includes changes to the Corps' operations of the lower Columbia River and lower Snake River dams, human health and safety will remain our priority. The Corps will continue working with the maritime navigators to ensure modified operations provide safe navigation conditions.

The MOU and U.S. Commitments documents describe numerous actions beyond just lower Snake River restoration and recognize that any breaching of the lower Snake River dams would require specific authorization and appropriations from Congress. As such, this agreement does not endorse or commit to breaching any of the lower Snake River dams. Under the MOU and U.S. Commitments, the Corps would participate in and help fund studies to assist in analyzing alternatives to the commercial transportation and recreation services provided by the lower Snake River dams. In-depth analyses, informed with broad input from affected parties, is important to any decisions that might ultimately be made regarding the status of any current infrastructure.

In summary, Congress has authorized the Corps and other Federal agencies to operate the Columbia River System projects for multiple purposes. The Columbia Basin is a complex system, and the Corps, working in partnership with the other federal agencies, Tribal Nations, states, and stakeholders, will continue to focus on providing innovative solutions to the serious issues facing the Columbia River Basin, including actions to protect and enhance both communities and ecosystems, consistent with the congressionally authorized purposes.

Once again, thank you for the invitation to testify before you today. I look forward to your questions.