

**Statement of Dustin Sherer,
Senior Advisor to the Assistant Secretary for Water and Science,
U.S. Department of the Interior
Before the
U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources,
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries
On
H.R. 4970, Orland Project Water Management Act and H.R. 2073, the Defending Our
Dams Act**

September 3, 2025

Chair Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle, and members of the Subcommittee, I am Dustin Sherer, Senior Advisor to the Assistant Secretary for Water and Science within the Department of the Interior (Department). Thank you for the opportunity to share the Department's views on H.R. 4970, Orland Project Water Management Act and H.R. 2073, Defending our Dams Act.

H.R. 4970, Orland Project Water Management Act

The Orland Project, in north-central California, is located about 100 miles north of Sacramento. The project occupies parts of neighboring Glenn, Tehama, and Colusa counties. One of the oldest projects ever tackled by the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation), the project irrigates 21,000 acres, or 1 percent of the Sacramento Valley's total irrigable soil. Water was delivered to the first farm units at the beginning of the 1910 growing season. The project is supplied by Stony Creek, a tributary of the Sacramento River. Flowing northward, the creek gathers water drained from the surrounding slopes of the Coast Range Mountains. The collected water is conveyed to lands on both sides of the creek near the town of Orland.

The Orland Project comprises two main dams to store water, East Park and Stony Gorge, two diversion dams, almost 17 miles of canals, and 139 miles of laterals. Orland has some of the best conditions for agriculture in the country. The growing season lasts over 262 days from March to November. The project's soil is considered some of the richest and most productive in the nation.

Through the Reclamation States Emergency Drought Relief Act of 1991 (Act), Reclamation provides financial assistance on a competitive basis for applicants to develop drought contingency plans or to update existing plans. In general, the planning process is structured to help planners answer key questions on recognizing, understanding the impacts of, and determining how to protect themselves from drought. It also encourages an open and inclusive planning effort that employs a proactive approach to build long-term drought resiliency.

The Act also allows for Reclamation to undertake emergency response actions under the Drought Response Program to minimize losses and damages resulting from drought, relying on the

authorities in Title I of the Act. Emergency response actions are crisis driven actions in response to unanticipated circumstances. As defined within the Act, eligible emergency response actions are limited to temporary construction activities such as storage and conveyance, and temporary water purchases through contracts not to exceed 2 years. The Act is an important authority for the Department and Reclamation to continue to respond to and mitigate the impacts of drought.

H.R. 4970 would amend the Act to allow for the sale of water in excess of the needs of the Orland Unit Water Users Association to be sold via temporary contract to the Sacramento Canals Unit of the Central Valley Project, which includes the Tehama-Colusa Canal Authority. This type of project flexibility complements the public policy intent behind the Drought Act. Currently, the water rights for the Orland Project are held by the United States, and the applicable water right certificates issued to individual landowners restrict the application of the water to specific Orland Project lands.

The Department supports H.R. 4970 because it would provide greater local autonomy to move water where it is needed most when the needs of the Orland Project water users have been met.

H.R. 2073, Defending Our Dams Act

Reclamation's Columbia-Pacific Northwest Region includes most of the U.S. portion of the Columbia River Basin watershed, including the Snake River. Since 1904, Congress has authorized 39 Reclamation projects in the Columbia River Basin. These projects include 72 dams, dikes, and diversions, and more than 4,700 miles of canals.

H.R. 2073 responds to ongoing efforts that propose breaching or otherwise altering four U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dams on the Lower Snake River in Washington (Ice Harbor, Lower Monumental, Little Goose, and Lower Granite). These four Lower Snake River dams are part of the Federal Columbia River System, which consists of 14 multipurpose projects including Reclamation's Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River (Washington) and Reclamation's Hungry Horse Dam on the South Fork Flathead River (Montana).

The Columbia River System Operations (CRSO) Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) analysis process started in September 2016. In September 2020, Reclamation, Bonneville Power Administration, and the Corps of Engineers released the Columbia River System Operations (CRSO) Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and Record of Decision. These co-lead agencies analyzed a reasonable range of alternatives in the EIS to address current and anticipated operations, maintenance and configuration. The agencies selected the Preferred Alternative, which sought to achieve a reasonable balance of multiple river resource needs and agency mission requirements. It was comprised of a suite of operational and structural measures that allow the Federal agencies to meet the Purpose and Need Statement and objectives of the EIS, including those to benefit species listed as threatened and endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

Breaching the four lower Snake River dams has been a topic of public discourse for decades. The EIS provided an updated analysis of the many biological and sociological variables and a range of potential costs and benefits of retaining or breaching the lower Snake River dams as part of Multiple Objective Alternative 3. The Preferred Alternative did not include the dam breaching measures evaluated in the EIS.

On June 12, 2025, President Trump signed a Presidential Memorandum titled “Stopping Radical Environmentalism to Generate Power for the Columbia River Basin.” The Memorandum directed the Secretary of Energy, the Secretary of the Interior, the Secretary of Commerce, and the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works to withdraw from the December 14, 2023, Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) filed in connection with litigation that followed the 2020 CRSO EIS.

In accordance with the Presidential Memorandum, the Bureau of Reclamation terminated its water supply replacement study, which evaluated replacement measures for water supply in Idaho and Washington that would be affected by a potential breach of the lower Snake River dams. This study, which had advanced to the public draft stage, was one of a suite of Federal commitments in the 2023 MOU addressing impacts related to potential breach of the Lower Snake River dams, including transportation, hydropower generation, and recreation.

The Department has no ongoing activities that would be impacted by H.R. 2073 as drafted. Removing the four Lower Snake River dams would impact regional hydropower production, barge transportation, and irrigation infrastructure used by farmers and rural economies. The Department looks forward to working with the Subcommittee as Congress considers H.R. 2073.