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Grant program would pay for cleaner Columbia

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A Tidewater barge moves down the Columbia River on Wednesday near the Wallula Gap east of Umatilla. Oregon congressional delegates and Northwest tribal leaders are seeking to create a \$50 million grant program to improve water quality in the Columbia Basin. STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

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projects through the Environmental Protection Agency to cut back on pollution and eliminate pathways for toxins into the river — such as stormwater runoff.

The legislation is not a mandate, nor does it add new EPA regulations, but rather provides a competitive source of funding for organizations interested in cleaning up contaminated sites and monitoring water quality in the basin.

“The Columbia River is an Oregon icon that is central to both our environment and our economy,” Merkley said in a statement Wednesday. “A clean Columbia River is essential for the health of our communities and for the strength of our fishing and recreation industries.”

Oregon delegates and Northwest tribal leaders are pursuing a \$50 million federal grant program to improve water quality in the Columbia River Basin.

The Columbia River is a major source of renewable energy, food and jobs throughout the Pacific Northwest.

A group of five Oregon Democrats is now working to establish a voluntary grant program to keep the Columbia’s waters clean of toxins.

Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, along with Reps. Earl Blumenauer, Suzanne Bonamici and Peter DeFazio, have reintroduced legislation that would set aside \$50 million over five years for projects to clean up the basin and more closely monitor contamination.

Dubbed the Columbia River Basin Restoration Act of 2015, the bill would provide funding for

Rep. Blumenauer described the Columbia as the “lifeblood of the Pacific Northwest,” but said the river has become dangerously polluted. The EPA has identified a number of emerging toxic threats to the river, ranging from flame retardants to pharmaceuticals.

Those are in addition to what are known as legacy contaminants, including polychlorinated biphenyl, or PCBs, that are now banned by the EPA but still found in products like inks and dyes. High levels of PCBs in the river build up in the fatty tissue of fish and lamprey, and can pose a health risk when eaten by humans or other animals.

Other contaminants can come from agricultural pesticides that drift in the air or seep into water runoff, as well as mercury from burning coal. Oregon’s last remaining coal-fired power plant is located in Boardman not far from the Columbia River, though it is slated to close or switch to an alternative fuel source by 2020.

The Hanford Nuclear Reservation is also located along the river, which in the past has released radioactive materials into the air and water.

Some contaminants are known to cause cancer, while others are linked to neurological problems, birth defects and learning disabilities. As recently as 2013, Oregon and Washington issued warnings against eating resident fish from the Columbia between Bonneville and McNary dams due to high levels of contamination.

According to a fish consumption survey in the Columbia River Basin, tribal members were eating 6 to 11 times more fish than the estimated national average. Native fish are among the tribes’ cultural and traditional First Foods.

Sara Thompson, public information officer for the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, said they support the bill to encourage more conversation about the health and quality of water in local fisheries.

“We rely heavily on subsistence fisheries to feed our families, supply our longhouses and supply our churches,” Thompson said. “The answer is not to tell people not to consume fish. The answer is to clean up our waterways. That should be our number one priority.”

CRITFIC represents the four American Indian tribes with treaty fishing rights on the Columbia: the Umatilla, Warm Springs, Yakama and Nez Perce. Total enrollment in the tribes is approximately 21,000 members.

About 8 million people total live in the basin, which stretches into parts of seven different states. The river provides more than just habitat for fish and wildlife; hydroelectric dams generate a large amount of the region’s electricity, and navigation locks provide safe passage for ships carrying cargo for industry.

The Pacific Northwest Waterways Association lobbies for that infrastructure to boost ports and trade. The organization has also thrown its support behind the river restoration act, saying clean waters are not only good for the environment, but good for business.

Kristin Meira, executive director of the PNWA, said ports and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers do their own dredging of the river in an effort to increase transportation and jobs. But if that sediment is contaminated, it can’t be placed back in the water and becomes much more expensive to haul out to a waste repository for treatment.

“Contaminated sediment really is a problem for everyone,” Meira said. “It really is part of doing business the right way in the Northwest.”

Meira said the bill takes the right approach by creating a voluntary program for funding projects, and not adding any more layers of government tape onto an already highly regulated system.

“The ports and operators are already very good citizens,” she said. “We have a pretty great system here on the river moving any type of cargo in an environmentally responsible fashion.”

A previous version of the bill was proposed in 2010 but failed to gain traction in Congress. Groups are optimistic about their chances of success this time around.

“Anytime the tribes see federal agencies willing to put water quality first, we are optimistic,” Thompson said. “This is a conversation we need to have.”

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