

Industry prepares for 14-week lock closure in December 2016

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The Pacific Northwest agriculture industry is preparing for another extended closure on the Columbia-Snake river system, slated for late 2016 to early 2017.

The Pacific Northwest agriculture industry is already beginning to plan for an extended lock closure on the Columbia-Snake river system slated to begin in December 2016.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers plans the 14-week closure to last from Dec. 12, 2016, through March 20, 2017. The last extended closure, also 14 weeks, took place in the winter of 2010-2011 to add three new lock gates at The Dalles, John Day and Lower Monumental dams.

Agricultural stakeholders have time to plan for the closure, either by shipping crops early or making alternate transportation plans, said Kristin Meira, executive director of the Pacific Northwest Waterways Association.

The closure is “critical” for the continued reliability and efficiency of the river system, Meira said. Corps districts in Portland and Walla Walla, Wash., are involved.

“(They) are systematically and almost continuously evaluating all of the various components it takes to operate these locks, figuring out which ones are reaching the ends of their design lives,” Meira said. “People are planning, truly, for the next 50 years of the locks.”

More than 9 million tons of cargo are barged each year on the rivers. Despite the recent loss of container carriers at the Port of Portland, the system still has significant volumes of wheat headed downriver to Portland to be shipped overseas and petroleum heading upriver, Meira said.

The corps recently kicked off communication efforts with stakeholders this time, which will be ongoing and include conference calls, Meira said.

“We will work with the corps and our membership to ensure that all farmers, shippers, ports and towboaters and people who rely on this river system to participate in world trade all are aware that it’s coming, that it’s to be planned for and that it’s an investment in the future reliability of the system,” Meira said.

Stakeholders can contact the corps to sign up for regular updates by e-mailing FY17LockOutage@usace.army.mil

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