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Bill to clean Columbia River added to water package

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Congress is making headway on establishing a grant program for environmental cleanup projects in the Columbia River Basin.

Oregon Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley reintroduced the Columbia River Restoration Act last year, along with fellow Oregon Reps. Earl Blumenauer, Suzanne Bonamici and Peter DeFazio, all Democrats. The bill was added into a broader package of water legislation Wednesday, which could pass the Senate this week.

Grants would help pay for things like reducing pollution in the Columbia River, cleaning up contamination, protecting fish and wildlife habitat and promoting community engagement. A collaborative group would also assess trends in water quality and identify problems throughout the basin. That group would consist of representatives from state and local governments, tribes, industry, conservation groups and landowners.

“The Columbia River is a cornerstone of our cultural history, used for commerce, fishing, recreation and agriculture,” Wyden said in an announcement. “The Pacific Northwest relies on this vital resource remaining clean and healthy to meet our needs.”

The Columbia River Restoration Program would fall under the Environmental Protection Agency. It would not add any new regulations, but provide a competitive source of funding dedicated to the basin.

In 2006, the EPA designated the Columbia River Basin a priority “large aquatic ecosystem” in the same class as the Chesapeake Bay, Great Lakes, Gulf of Mexico and Puget Sound. Yet the basin is the only one of those large ecosystems that receives no dedicated funding to clean up and monitor toxic chemicals.

The restoration act initially proposed setting aside \$50 million over five years, though the latest provision — which was added into the Water Resources Development Act — does not specify a funding level for the program. A spokeswoman for Sen. Merkley said Congress will be able to set a funding level if and when the bill passes.

The Columbia is the largest river in the Northwest, and fourth-largest in the country. It spans 1,243 miles, with a drainage basin roughly the size of France. The basin reaches into seven states and British Columbia, and is historically the largest salmon-producing river system in the world with annual returns peaking around 16 million fish.

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The EPA has identified numerous toxins present in the basin, including arsenic, lead, pesticides and flame retardants. These are in addition to so-called “legacy pollutants,” such as polychlorinated biphenyl, or PCBs, which are now banned by the EPA but can still be found in imported products like inks and dyes.

High levels of some pollutants can build up in the fatty tissue of fish and lamprey in the river, which are then consumed by people. Sara Thompson, spokeswoman with the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, said she believes water quality is one of the most overlooked issues that needs to be addressed across the basin.

“Water is our ultimate First Food,” Thompson said. “Any steps we can take to improve water quality is a step in the right direction.”

CRITFC represents the four tribes with treaty fishing rights on the Columbia, including the Umatilla, Warm Springs, Yakama and Nez Perce. Other groups that support the Columbia River Restoration Act include the Lower Columbia Estuary Partnership, Pacific Northwest Waterways Association and Salmon-Safe.

For Oregonians, Merkley said the Columbia River is more than an iconic landscape. It’s a crucial part of the state’s environment and economy.

“A clean Columbia River is essential for the health of our communities and the strength of our fishing and recreation industries, and I’ll keep pushing to get this legislation across the finish line,” he said.

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