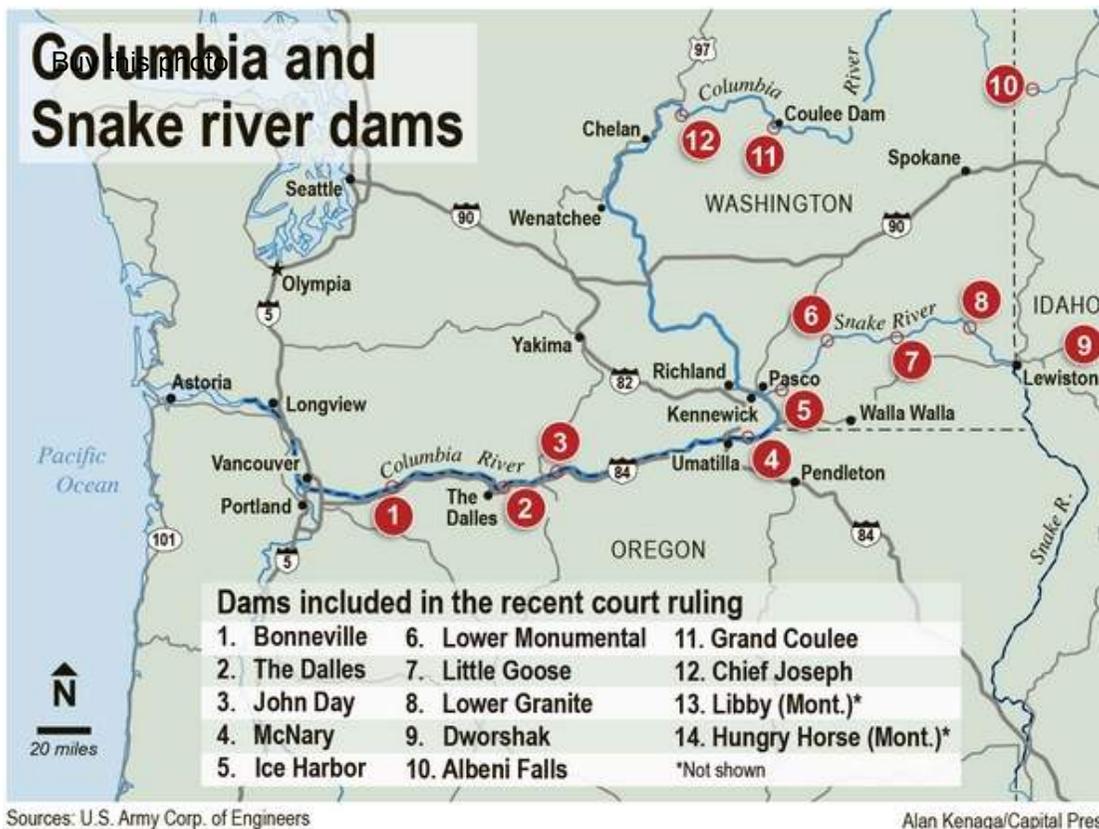




Ag voices must be heard on Columbia River System, group says

Matthew Weaver • Capital Press
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The Pacific Northwest Waterways Association is encouraging farmers, ranchers, shippers and others involved in agriculture to share the importance of the Columbia-Snake River system during a federal public comment period, which ends Jan. 17.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Reclamation and Bonneville Power Administration are preparing a new impact statement on the Columbia River system and the 14 federal projects in the Columbia Basin. The public comment period ends Jan. 17.

The EIS is in response to U.S. District Judge Michael Simon's ruling in May. He found that the federal government failed to use the best available science to consider salmon recovery, including the effects of climate change and the possibility of breaching one or more dams on the Lower Snake River. The judge directed the agencies to create an updated plan for the river system within five years.

The agencies are determining what to study as part of a scoping process, said Kristin Meira, executive director of the association.

"We're looking forward to a very robust study of the entire river system," she said.

The meetings come at a time when many opinions exist for the future of the system, she said.

"There's also a lot of misinformation out there about barging, fish numbers and the true impacts of the dams on the river," she said.

Farmers who ship grain and others who rely on the river system should ask the federal agencies to consider all possible impacts to the region's economy as they consider changes, Meira said.

"It's really important that these agencies hear from all users so they understand how extensive the impacts of the river are," she said. "It really is absolutely critical to our Northwest economy, so everybody needs to lend their voices and say, 'This river matters to me. Don't forget to study my part of the river as you think about any changes in the future.'"

Those who favor removal of the dams on the river system are also likely to participate, Meira warned.

"This is a great opportunity to have the facts be documented and make sure we're all aware of what's happening on the river as we think about how it should be operated," she said. "For the benefit of our fish, but also making sure we have the ability to move cargo, generate power and have irrigation here in the Northwest."

The agencies will have public meetings around the region and two web seminars. Meira encourages ag industry members to attend.

"They're not only a chance to come in and provide your voice, they're also great information sessions," she said. "Maybe you know about one part of the river, but you don't know about all the different things happening on the river."

Online

For a list of the meetings got to <http://www.crsi.info/>