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Corps plans next steps after accident at John Day lock

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Portland District is responding to an accident that occurred last night in the John Day navigation lock. A barge tow was in the lock while it was filling, preparing to travel upstream. During the filling process, one of the empty grain barges came into contact with the upstream gate, moving it out of position, and damaging the gate.

This accident happened as the Corps is preparing for the annual two-week lock outage that begins on March 8th, when all of the locks on the system are “de-watered” so that inspections and repairs can take place. Due to this accident at John Day, that lock will close now, so that Corps engineers can assess damage and make plans for the lock to return to service.

PNWA has been in contact with Corps officials regarding this accident. PNWA Government Relations Director Kristin Meira states that “we are pleased the Corps is already devising a plan to return this lock to service, and they are determining when a floating bulkhead could be used to resume regular lockages.”

A floating bulkhead is a structure that can be used in place of a normal lock gate, during repairs or inspections. A floating bulkhead for the upstream gate is already at the project and ready to be used, once the Corps is able to move or remove the damaged gate. It should also be noted that the upstream gate is a relatively small structure. The downstream gate has a maximum lift of 113', whereas the smaller upstream gate is approximately 18'.

The John Day lock is part of the Columbia Snake River System. The system is comprised of eight navigation locks and an inland barging channel, and the deep draft Lower Columbia River. This system is the largest export gateway in the country for wheat and barley, and each year, inland barging keeps 700,000 trucks off the highways that run through the sensitive airshed of the Columbia River Gorge.

The Corps of Engineers has been making targeted reinvestments in this system as it ages. These major pieces of federal transportation infrastructure are akin to highways and bridges, which occasionally require repairs to ensure continued safety and efficiency. Meira notes that “PNWA strongly supports the continued maintenance of the Columbia Snake River System, and we will work to ensure funding is made available to address repairs that will be needed for the John Day upstream navigation lock.”

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About PNWA: The Pacific Northwest Waterways Association (PNWA) is a non-partisan, non-profit organization that advocates for federal policies and funding in support of regional economic development. PNWA represents multiple industries in the public and private sectors in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and California. Members include public ports, navigation, transportation, international trade, tourism, agriculture, forest products, energy and local government interests. Since its founding in 1934, PNWA led the way for development of economic infrastructure for navigation, electric power and irrigated agriculture on the Columbia and Snake River System. In 1971, PNWA expanded, adding Puget Sound and coastal port members to provide a comprehensive regional perspective. Today, PNWA works with the U.S. Congress, federal agencies and regional decision leaders on transportation, trade, tourism, energy and environmental policy to enhance economic vitality in the Pacific Northwest. You can learn more about PNWA at www.pnwa.net.

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