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Snake River Dams vital to Northwest and the Nation

Harvest time in the Pacific Northwest means that our roads, rails and rivers are busy bringing wheat and other agricultural products to northwest ports for export overseas. Many of those crops are shipped via barge on the Columbia and Snake Rivers. The bulk nature of these products makes barging a particularly attractive option for Northwest farmers looking to move their products efficiently, safely and cost effectively.

Nearly 50% of the nation's wheat moves through the Columbia Snake River System, making it the country's top wheat export gateway. The inland barge system plays a key role in supporting this wheat movement. In fact, in 2012, 10% of all U.S. wheat exports moved through the Snake River dams. These dams and their federal navigation locks allow barges to provide cargo transportation between eastern Washington, eastern Oregon and northern Idaho and export facilities on the Lower Columbia River. In addition to their navigation benefits, these dams provide clean power to keep the lights on throughout the Northwest. The entire system works in unison to provide trade and power benefits for the region, and support jobs in the Northwest and beyond.

This is very busy time of year for traffic on the river. "During the peak fall transportation season, barges and cruise ships can be seen alongside salmon fishermen throughout the Columbia and Snake River System," says David Doeringsfeld, General Manager of the Port of Lewiston. "Since mid-September, barges carrying 2 million bushels of wheat and five cruise ships carrying over 1,500 passengers have passed through Lower Granite Dam." As Idaho's only port, the four Snake River dams provide a vital transport corridor for goods to be shipped easily and efficiently overseas.

The four Snake River dams are critical to the livelihood of Bill Flory, a wheat farmer in Lewiston Idaho. "The dams give me the ability to load my grain in Lewiston and I know without question that four days later it will have been loaded on a ship in Portland, ready for export," says Bill. "This speed and consistency allows farmers like me to be extremely competitive in international markets. Trucking and railing the grain can't beat the consistency and pricing that barging through the dams offer."

One barge can hold between 100,000 and 120,000 bushels of wheat, with a four-barge tow handling 400,000 to 480,000 bushels in a single voyage. A four barge tow, the typical configuration on this river system, moves the same amount of cargo as 538 trucks or 140 rail cars. Annually, barging on the Snake River alone keeps 112,000 semi-trucks off our highways and 32,000 rail cars from moving through the sensitive air shed of the Columbia River Gorge. Combined with the lowest emissions of any cargo transportation, barging allows Northwest producers to have a reliable, efficient, and environmentally friendly method of getting their goods to overseas markets.

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Still, the myth that the region would be better off without the benefits the dams provide continues to be pushed by a small but vocal group of activists. These activists call for breaching the Snake River dams, at the expense of Northwest farmers and shippers, as well as our emission free hydropower. They cite our iconic Northwest fish runs as the main reason for this extreme goal. These groups refuse to acknowledge the unprecedented collaboration between stakeholders and agencies which has delivered real results for our fish. Survival of juvenile fish moving through our dams is now averaging 97% at each project, approaching levels seen in rivers without dams.

“We are really proud of the successes we’ve seen on the river,” says Kristin Meira, Executive Director of Pacific Northwest Waterways Association. “The collaboration between the federal agencies, tribes, states, and river users is paying off, and we’re seeing success with both juvenile migration and adult returns. Thanks to efforts in both the tributaries and estuaries, and at the dams themselves, we’re seeing more salmon in the Columbia and Snake Rivers than before Bonneville Dam was put in place. A lot of thought and effort has gone into improving the way the river is operated, and we’re proving over and over again that dams and fish can coexist.”

The Snake River dams are truly critical elements of Northwest infrastructure. Their trade benefits allow farmers efficient and consistent access to world markets. Their energy production is vital to our emission-free Northwest hydropower portfolio. Years of collaboration have made possible the shared use of the Columbia and Snake Rivers for healthy fish runs, energy, trade, and transportation.

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About PNWA: The Pacific Northwest Waterways Association (PNWA) is a non-profit trade association that advocates for federal policies and funding in support of regional economic and environmental sustainability. PNWA represents multiple industries in the public and private sectors in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. Members include public ports, navigation, transportation, international trade, tourism, agriculture, forest products, energy and local government interests. Learn more about PNWA at www.pnwa.net.