COLUMBIA RIVER SYSTEM – ENVIRONEMTENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

PNWA Supports a Balanced Approach to Fish and Dams

PNWA manages the Inland Ports and Navigation Group (IPNG). IPNG has been an intervener in the lawsuit over dam operations for twenty years, supporting the work of the federal agencies and submitting information to the Court regarding the views of the ports, terminals, navigation, growers, utilities and more.

Northwest navigation interests have consistently backed strong salmon recovery efforts that protect the diverse uses of the river system. PNWA, along with most of the scientific community, acknowledges that salmon populations have been impacted by a range of factors. A commitment to enhancing the key areas of salmon recovery—hydro, habitat, harvest, and hatcheries—is essential. Over the past two decades, extreme measures such as dam breaching have been thoroughly examined and consistently dismissed.

- Navigation and hydropower are clean, efficient, and cost-effective. Hydropower produces no greenhouse gases, supports wind and solar integration, and is crucial for regional energy.
- Barging on the Columbia Snake River System is the most fuel-efficient transportation method.
- Dam breaching would halt barge navigation and substantially increase greenhouse gas emissions from freight and baseload energy replacement.

Columbia River System Operations (CRSO) Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) completed in 2020

As a result of previous litigation regarding Columbia River System Operations (CRSO), the federal agencies released 2020 Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The CRSO EIS was approved by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Reclamation and Bonneville Power Administration, and was supported by Biological Opinions from both NOAA Fisheries and the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife. It documents the selection of a Preferred Alternative to accomplish the multiple purposes of 14 federal dams in the Columbia River Basin while complying with relevant environmental laws and regulations.

The EIS involved nearly four years of regional collaboration between federal agencies, numerous Tribes, and the states of Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana. The National Environmental Policy Act process that guided development of the EIS also included several opportunities for agencies, advocacy groups, and the public to review extensive draft documents. Nearly 59,000 comments were submitted, which were reviewed by federal officials and addressed in the final EIS. Community members also submitted public testimony during several formal comment periods.

The agencies decided against breaching the four lower Snake River dams, citing their importance for low-carbon hydropower and efficient navigation. Breaching would demand costly replacements for barging systems with rail and trucking, double the risk of power shortages, and significantly impact climate change.

Current Status - A shift from litigation to mediation

Despite the thorough and expansive CRSO EIS, the federal government was again sued in October 2020 because their final record of decision (ROD) did not include breaching of the four Lower Snake River dams. In 2021, the federal government and plaintiffs agreed to a stay in the litigation to focus on a negotiated path forward. This stay expired on August 31, 2023. The White House Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) and the Federal Mediation & Conciliation Service (FMCS) are leading negotiations between all parties which include several federal agencies, tribes, the States of Oregon, Idaho, Montana and Washington, environmental groups, and defendant intervenors including IPNG.

Despite numerous concerns with the FMCS process, including a significant focus on dam breaching, IPNG has continued to participate in the mediation in good faith. IPNG continues our focus on the areas where we can collaboratively work with regional partners to improve fish runs across the basin. These include increasing funding and support for habitat and ecosystem projects, culvert removal, toxics reduction, predator abatement, advanced fish passage solutions at the federal projects, and more. We also encourage the federal government to study the areas where there are known gaps in information, including the impact of ocean conditions on salmon, steelhead and other species. It is widely understood that ocean conditions and climate change are the primary drivers of salmonid mortality, not only in the Pacific Northwest but across the entire U.S. West Coast.