Written Testimony of Casey Chumrau

CEO, Washington Grain Commission

"Exposing President Biden's Plan to Dismantle the Snake River Dams and the Negative Impacts to the U.S."

House Energy and Commerce Committee

Energy, Climate, and Grid Security Subcommittee

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Introduction

Chairman Duncan, Ranking Member DeGette, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on this important issue. My name is Casey Chumrau, and I am the Chief Executive Officer of the Washington Grain Commission.

The Washington Grain Commission was created in 1958 as the Washington Wheat Commission by the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) with the support of Eastern Washington farmers. The goal of the group, as explained by the director of the WSDA at the time is, "to do as a group what cannot be done alone." The name of the organization was changed to the Washington Grain Commission in 2009 when barley came under the auspices of the organization.

The Columbia Snake River System

Grain growers in the Pacific Northwest (PNW) rely on the Columbia Snake River System, and the Lower Snake River Dams (LSRD) in particular, for their livelihoods. The Columbia Snake River System is the top wheat export gateway in the nation, with more than 55 percent of all U.S. wheat exports moving through the PNW by barge or rail. Specifically, 10 percent of wheat that is exported from the United States passes through the four locks and dams along the Lower Snake River[1]. This is especially important for our state because Washington is the fourth largest wheat exporter in the nation[2], exporting 90% of the wheat produced in the state.[3] In addition, across the agriculture industry, the Columbia Snake River System is the second largest gateway for soybean and corn exports coming from as far as the Midwest, serving as an important channel to bring crop inputs, like potash, to farmers in the region who need

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[1] Facts about U.S. wheat exports and the Columbia Snake River system. U.S. Wheat Associates. (2022, March 28). https://www.uswheat.org/wheatletter/facts-about-u-s-wheat-exports-and-the-columbia-snake-river-system/

[2] State Agricultural Trade Data. USDA ERS - State Agricultural Trade Data. (2022). https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/state-agricultural-trade-data/

[3] Fortenbery, T. R., & Nadreau, T. P. (n.d.). Contribution of Wheat Production to the Washington Economy. https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:VA6C2:43500d5f-3bf2-4b1d-a6bc-670d94acc4b3

fertilizer to produce the safe and affordable food supply that is found on every American's table[4].

Economic Impact

Washington's agriculture industry, and its ability to produce and export products globally, is critical to the state and region's economy. The total value of wheat exported through the PNW is nearly $4 billion per year.[5]

For Washington, the state is among the top 20 states for agricultural exports in the nation, with over $8 billion in Washington-grown or processed food and agriculture exports in 2022. A significant volume of food and agriculture products from other states including soybeans, wheat, and corn are exported through Washington state ports each year. Once these pass-through exports are combined with Washington-grown or processed exports, the total value reaches over $23 billion.[6]

The Washington wheat industry alone contributed over $3.1 billion to the state's economy in 2022, with a heightened impact in rural areas. [7] In the same year, total direct employment associated with Washington wheat production amounted to 3,672

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[4] Columbia Snake River System Facts. Pacific Northwest Waterways Association - PNWA. (n.d.). https://www.pnwa.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/CSRS.pdf

[5] US Wheat Associates Price Report Data. (2023). Wheat Export Data/Value of PNW Exports. https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:VA6C2:dec3a7ec-b213-4c44-b700-b4e86ba42131

[6] Exports statistics. Statistics | Washington State Department of Agriculture. (2022). https://agr.wa.gov/departments/business-and-marketing-support/international/statistics

[7] Fortenbery, T. R., & Nadreau, T. P. (n.d.). Contribution of Wheat Production to the Washington Economy. https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:VA6C2:43500d5f-3bf2-4b1d-a6bc-670d94acc4b3

jobs in 2022. Indirect and induced employment also grew and supported another 11,676 jobs.[8]

The impact that Washington farmers have on their local and regional economy is similar in communities across the country. In addition to direct sales of farm goods and commodities, farmers contribute to the economy and support other rural businesses through purchases of farm business inputs – everything from seed and fertilizer to business services. Additionally, the personal purchases of both farmers and their employees help to stimulate local economies and keep small businesses running.[9]

Supply Chain and Transportation

Over the last seventy years, growers and their federal government partners at the U.S. Department of Agriculture have invested billions of dollars and countless hours to build strong relationships with our trading partners. The U.S. Wheat industry differentiates itself by providing high-quality wheat and reliable delivery. The United States is a reliable trading partner in large part because of our world class, multi-modal infrastructure, which allows us to ship products safely and efficiently around the world. Any disruption to that system would hurt our ability to consistently provide abundant, high-value food products and weaken the competitiveness of U.S. producers in global markets.

Grain growers in PNW states are at the tip of the spear of those who would feel the disruption of having to divert export goods to trucking and rail because there is insufficient alternative transportation infrastructure to replace the barge shipments of grain along the Columbia Snake River System to export markets. For example, one loaded covered hopper barge carries over 58,000 bushels of wheat. It would take 113,187 semi-trailers each year carrying 910 bushels of wheat to replace the 103 million bushels shipped on the Snake River via barge annually. That is 310 more trucks each

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[8] Fortenbery, T. R., & Nadreau, T. P. (n.d.). Contribution of Wheat Production to the Washington Economy. https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:VA6C2:43500d5f-3bf2-4b1d-a6bc-670d94acc4b3

[9] Fortenbery, T. R., & Nadreau, T. P. (n.d.). Contribution of Wheat Production to the Washington Economy. https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:VA6C2:43500d5f-3bf2-4b1d-a6bc-670d94acc4b3

day, making round trips to the Tri-Cities, 365 days per year.[10] To that end, barging is the most fuel-efficient mode of transportation when compared to railroads and trucking.[11] Each barge that must be replaced by a truck means more pollution, more traffic, increased costs and increased wear and tear on our roads – and that's if we could even hire the drivers needed to drive these trucks in the increasingly tight labor market for drivers.

Irrigation

In addition to the essential services the Snake River System provides in transportation, farmers in Washington rely on the dams as a critical source for irrigation. Droughts affect the state's agricultural production and have become more frequent in recent years. As a result, irrigation is necessary for most crops, especially east of the Cascades. According to a recent analysis by Columbia-Snake River Irrigators Association, approximately 90,640 acres are being irrigated along the Ice Harbor and the Upper McNary pool.[12]

Not only is irrigation a critical tool for farmers in low rainfall zones, but it also has environmental benefits, both on and off the farm. Irrigated systems allow for the ability to control soil moisture more precisely, reducing the risk of erosion, plant diseases, and nutrient leaching. In addition, irrigation technology has continuously evolved over time, and the growing popularity of pressurized irrigation systems have allowed increased water-use efficiency.

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[10]Compare cargo capacities. US Army Corps of Engineers - Walla Walla District . (n.d.). https://www.nww.usace.army.mil/Portals/28/docs/navigation/CargoComparison.pdf

[11] A Modal Comparison of Domestic Freight Transportation Effects on the General Public: 2001–2019. Texas A&M Transportation Institute, & Center for Ports and Waterways and Waterways. (n.d.). https://www.nationalwaterwaysfoundation.org/file/28/tti%202022%20final%20report%202001-2019%201.pdf

[12] Risk Mitigation Response Alternative. CSRIA | Columbia-Snake River Irrigators Association. (2019, November). http://www.csria.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/CSRIA-White-Paper-Risk-Mitigation-Dam-Breaching-Drawdowns-11-20-2019.pdf

Should the LSRD be breached, the essential irrigation provided will no longer be available to the family-farmers who have come to rely on them, especially as drought creates immense challenges during the growing season. Replacing irrigation infrastructure would be an extremely costly endeavor. If the dams were to be breached the water table is estimated to drop approximately 80 feet.[13] This would make most of the groundwater wells in the area non-operational. To reach the river at its new water level, major and costly infrastructure investments would be required, such as the reconstruction of pump stations.

Biden Administration Actions and Commitments Document

On December 14, 2023, the U.S. government released an agreement titled "U.S. Government Commitments in Support of the Columbia Basin Restoration Initiative and in Partnership with the Six Sovereigns." The commitments made by the U.S. government in this document were reached without adequate input from stakeholders who would ultimately be impacted by the decisions.

Due to this process's secrecy, agriculture voices were largely excluded from discussion regarding impacts and commitments for funding and mitigation. Notably, throughout the entirety of the process, impacted stakeholders from the agriculture and power industries have been willing to share perspectives and provide insight to find a solution that protects the integrity of the dams as well as health of salmon. There is no concrete science that shows removing the LSRD will quantifiably improve salmon returns. To that end, we believe that the impacts of these commitments will be severe for agricultural producers who rely on the dams for transportation and irrigation, as well as for affordable clean energy from hydropower and may not produce the desired results for salmon.

2020 Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)

We have significant concerns with the narrow data used to justify the recommendations made in the commitments document. The commitments ignored the findings of 2020 Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) released jointly by the Army Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Reclamation, and Bonneville Power Administration which revealed that removing the LSRD goes against environmental statutes and public interests.

The report indicated that continued operation of the dams, along with maintaining and improving fish passage technology and implementing operational water management

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[13] Risk Mitigation Response Alternative. CSRIA | Columbia-Snake River Irrigators Association. (2019, November). http://www.csria.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/CSRIA-White-Paper-Risk-Mitigation-Dam-Breaching

flexibilities to improve flow would “provide the most balanced way to fulfill all of the CRS [Columbia River System] projects’ congressionally authorized purposes, meets a majority of the CRSO EIS [Columbia River System Operations Environmental Impact Statement] objectives, minimizes and avoids adverse impacts to the environment, benefits tribal interests and treaty resources, and provides additional improvements for ESA-listed species."[14]

Path Forward

We strongly believe that dams and salmon can and do co-exist. With a myriad of challenges facing the salmon population, we are committed to building upon current investments and technological advancements. Currently, the LSRD have world-class fish passage and juvenile survival rates upwards of 95 percent.[15] We believe any work moving forward should build off the fish passages, instead of eliminating them. We also support investments made at the federal and state level for culvert removal, fish habitat restoration, toxin reduction, and predator abatement.

Conclusion

The opportunities to ensure salmon populations continue to grow do not have to come at the cost of destroying the integrity of the Columbia Snake River System and the ability for farmers to produce a safe and abundant food supply. The importance of the river system for the agriculture industry, and particularly for grain growers across Washington, cannot be overstated. I look forward to discussing the importance of the four LRSD with you today. Thank you.

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[14] U.S. Army Corps of Engineers – Northwestern Division, Bureau of Reclamation – Columbia-Pacific Northwest Region, & Bonneville Power Administration (DOE/EIS-0529). (2020, September). Columbia River System Operations Environmental Impact Statement Record of Decision. https://usace.contentdm.oclc.org/utils/getfile/collection/p16021coll7/id/16248

[15] U.S. Army Corps of Engineers – Northwestern Division, Bureau of Reclamation – Columbia-Pacific Northwest Region, & Bonneville Power Administration (DOE/EIS-0529). (2020, September). Columbia River System Operations Environmental Impact Statement Record of Decision. https://usace.contentdm.oclc.org/utils/getfile/collection/p16021coll7/id/16248