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Testimony
Before the Subcommittee on Water and Power
United State House of Representatives

Keeping the Columbia/Snake a Working River
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Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee:

I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify on an issue that is very personal to me.

I am here today as vice president of the American Farm Bureau Federation, the largest general agricultural organization in the world, and as president of the Washington Farm Bureau, the largest general agricultural organization in Washington state, representing more than 35,000 member families.

Perhaps even more importantly, I am here as a farmer who grows wheat not more than 50 miles from where we are today.

The wheat I grow is loaded onto barges at Almota or Central Ferry -- downriver from here -- and towed to Portland, where it is loaded on ocean-bound ships for export.

I personally know how important the Snake/Columbia River corridor is for agriculture. And I know how important a working river is to my friends, my neighbors ... to the community I grew up in, and to communities throughout Eastern Washington, Oregon and Idaho.

Let me put this as bluntly as I can.

We need the Snake/Columbia River system. We depend on water from the rivers for irrigation. We depend on barges to get our crops to market economically. We depend on barges to get the oil and fertilizer we need up river. And we depend on clean, renewable low-cost hydroelectric power to help keep farming affordable. The Snake/Columbia River system is the third-largest grain corridor in the world, and the largest transportation corridor for wheat in the United States.

Nearly 10 million tons of wheat are shipped down the river to Portland every year ... with almost 5 million tons loaded onto barges from facilities along the Snake River. Those barges also haul tons of potatoes, peas, beans, sweet corn, lentils, onions and other agricultural crops.

Eliminating the Snake River dams -- physically or operationally -- would devastate the agricultural economy of Eastern Washington and hurt farmers as far away as North Dakota. It would force many farmers off the land and turn agricultural communities into ghost towns.

And those people who say we could easily replace the barges with trucks or rail cars haven't looked at the facts.

A single barge carries as much as 35 railway hopper cars, or as much as 134 semi-trucks. We would need the equivalent of 120,000 rail cars annually, or 700,000 semi-trucks, to replace barges on the Snake/Columbia waterway.

That's thousands of trucks crowding onto the interstate through the Columbia Gorge all the way into Portland, more air pollution, higher costs for farmers -- doesn't make sense to me.

And even if enough rail cars and trucks existed -- and they don't -- the Corps of Engineers determined that the roads and railways along the river would probably collapse and tumble into the river gorge in more than 60 places if the dams were breached and the reservoirs drawn down.

Let's get real here. We continue to believe – supported by sound science and years of study by the National Marine Fisheries Service – that we can protect salmon without destroying the infrastructure that is the centerpiece of Eastern Washington's economy.

Now, with the time I have remaining, I'd like to comment on enforcement of the Endangered Species Act in general.

As you know, between salmon and the spotted owl, the Northwest has been in the crosshairs of the ESA for more than a decade. And the most important thing we have learned during this time is that the ESA is NOT about saving species.

Instead, the ESA is about litigation ... continual and costly litigation ... by well-funded special interest groups that sue again and again until they get the answer they want from the courts. And it's about control of our land and water

It's been well publicized that the ESA has not been particularly effective in recovering threatened or endangered species.

Only 15 of the 1,300 species listed as threatened or endangered have ever been (quote) recovered. In fact, more species – 16 -- have been delisted because of original errors in the listing data than because of any efforts at recovery.

However, the ESA has been very effective at disrupting the lives of ordinary Americans.

For example, for the past two years, farmers in Washington, Oregon and parts of California have been unable to use perfectly legal, extensively tested and EPA-approved agricultural chemicals within a football field of any river or creek NOT because there is evidence those chemicals are hurting salmon, but because a federal judge in Seattle found fault with the way the EPA consulted with U.S. Fish and Wildlife.

These farmers have done nothing wrong. Nobody has accused them of doing anything wrong.

But they are the ones who are being punished -- in the name of the ESA.

And when Farm Bureau filed an appeal, the same judge ruled that the economic hardship his order would have on farmers was, and I quote, "not relevant."

Not relevant? The law is punishing hard-working Americans who have done nothing wrong and that's not relevant?

If that's "not relevant," then something is badly out of whack with the law.

There has to be better balance between saving species and protecting the livelihoods of innocent people. I know I'm almost out of time, but I want to make just one more point.

Two weeks ago, for the third time in 12 years, a federal judge in Oregon ruled against the government over what is known as a biological opinion for the operation of Columbia/Snake River dams.

The administrative record in this case already fills more than 56 boxes – more than a ton of paperwork. And we still don't know what to expect ... or what is expected of us. And now, one judge is set up to micromanage the entire Snake/Columbia River hydroelectric system.

Already, the judge in this case will decide next week how much water will be spilled over the dams this summer to flush juvenile fish down the river – reducing water for irrigation, lowering river levels for barging, and further driving up electrical costs for the Northwest.

And ultimately, this case will affect the management of more than 70 million acres of land in the Columbia/Snake River basin – private and public.

It will affect more than 219,000 square miles in seven Western states.

And at this point, it looks like it will be decided by a judicial system that places the ESA ahead of people ... and the rights of fish ahead of the rights of farmers and ranchers ... whatever the cost. That's just wrong.

Let me just wrap up by saying that farmers and ranchers care about the environment. We care about the land – it's how we make our living and where we raise our families -- and we care about the wildlife.

But the ESA punishes the innocent. It punishes the very people who have taken care of the land. It punishes the people who provide the habitat for the species it is supposed to protect.

The most effective conservation programs are the ones that reward people for doing that little extra. The ESA, on the other hand, is a sledgehammer that too often leaves innocent property owners battered and bloodied. That's not the way the laws in this country are supposed to work, and after 32 years of little or no success ... after 32 years of trampling on individual rights ... it's time to fix what's wrong with the ESA.

Again, I want to thank the committee for this opportunity, and I would be happy to answer any questions I can.

[In support of this testimony on behalf of keeping the Snake/Columbia River a "working river," the Washington Farm Bureau is submitting the declaration of Dr. James J. Anderson, Research Associate Professor in the School of Aquatic and Fishery Sciences at the University of Washington, in *National Wildlife Federation, et. al. v. National Marine Fisheries Service, defendant, and Washington Farm Bureau Federation, et. al., defendant-intervenors*. Dr. Anderson's declaration is attached.]