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U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

Opening Statement of
Chairman Doc Hastings
House Committee on Natural Resources
At the Legislative Field Hearing on H.R. 6247

“The Saving our Federal Dams and New Hydropower Development and Jobs Act of 2012”
Pasco, Washington
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This hearing comes just weeks before Bonneville Dam – the first major Northwest federal hydropower dam to be built – celebrates the 75th anniversary of its dedication in 1937 by President Franklin Roosevelt. Several hundreds of miles upstream, Ice Harbor Dam, one of the lower Snake River dams, recently celebrated its 50th anniversary.

For decades, these and many other federal and non-federal hydropower dams—11 alone right here in central Washington—were constructed to harness the cleanest, most efficient form of energy. Regionally, Northwest dams produce over 70 percent of the power in Washington, 80 percent in Idaho, and about 60 percent of Oregon. These dams produce about 14,000 average megawatts of electricity every year – equivalent to the power needed for 11 cities the size of Seattle every year. Dams help make possible intermittent sources of energy like wind and solar, and help keep our electric transmission system reliable.

These dams were also built for other important purposes, including flood control, providing irrigation for one of the most productive agricultural areas of the nation, for recreation, and to provide a vital navigation link to transport billions of dollars worth of wheat, grains and goods to markets around the world.

There is no disagreement about the importance of salmon recovery, but it must be clearly stated that dams are helping recovery. With significant improvements to Columbia and Snake River dams, more fish are in the river than before the dams were built—and fish survival past the dams are much higher than ever before—up to 98 percent in some cases. While some insist the choice is “dams or fish”, it’s been proven we can have “fish and dams.”

Our current Northwest dam infrastructure cleanly powers our industries, businesses, jobs and families – and at low cost. But we must not be satisfied with the status quo. With ongoing threats to these dams and future development of hydropower as a renewable resource, we simply cannot take the status quo for granted. This is the purpose of the legislation that I’ve proposed and this hearing: to protect and promote our valuable hydropower assets.

The bill I introduced two weeks ago shines a bright light on the enormous benefits and potential of federal and non-federal hydropower dams, both in the Northwest and across the nation. The bill, as with all legislation, is a starting point for discussion and contains common sense actions to protect this renewable energy source.

For example, the bill, plain and simple, declares that hydropower is a renewable source of energy. Amazingly, some of the loudest advocates for increasing our nation's renewable energy supply refuse to recognize hydropower as renewable.

The bill also states that no federal dam breaching activities, including costly studies, can occur without the express approval of Congress. No single person, be they an unelected bureaucrat or federal judge, should ever have authority to initiate such an action.

The bill would also block imposition of the "Chu Memo", ordered by the Secretary of Energy, that could force power rate increases by BPA and other power marketing administrations (PMA's).

The bill would ensure common sense guides decisions on the costly spill of water past dam turbines – an often wasteful policy that has continued even when science shows spill harms fish more than the transportation of fish.

The bill would provide that families and businesses served by BPA and other PMA's receive transparent, honest information on how much of their power bill goes to fish recovery and how much supports wind power development.

The bill would prohibit groups filing lawsuits against the government from collecting federal funds and grants. Why should taxpayers fund both defendants and plaintiffs?

And the bill would ensure accountability from federal agencies to ensure they don't use the federal dam relicensing process as a hostage-taking exercise to bleed dam operators for money or unjustifiable policies. It does this very simply: it requires agencies to justify their actions in the light of day, not behind closed doors, and establishes FERC, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, as the referee to decide which mandatory conditions sought by a federal bureaucracy have merit.

Those are some, but not all of the bill's highlights.

Again, the purpose of this bill is to protect and promote the clean, green, renewable hydropower generated from dams, and the many other benefits they provide.

Back in 2000, the campaign to tear out the Snake River dams was waged as a full public debate, but the dam removal extremists lost that battle. They lost because the people of the Pacific Northwest know that removal of these dams would be an extreme action that would cost jobs, increase power rates, and harm the region's economy. And they lost because the science doesn't even show removal will actually recover fish.

This defeat didn't end the single-minded agenda of the dam removal extremists. Over the past decade, they changed their tactics from the overt to the more covert – but they are as committed and well-funded as ever. They've poured their money into lawyers and lawsuits aimed at pressuring federal agencies and seeking to advance their agenda in the courts, and particularly in the courtroom of a Portland judge who's now admitted his anti-dam bias. The threat to the Snake River and other dams is very real – and the common sense actions in this straightforward bill are intended to shine a light on these tactics, help stop this wasteful and extreme campaign, and protect these valuable assets and renewable energy sources.

These are the subjects of today's hearing and I look forward to hearing the testimony of the witnesses.