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Opening Statement
Congressman Tom McClintock
Chairman
House Water and Power Subcommittee
Oversight Hearing on
***“Protecting the Federal Hydropower Investment:
A Stakeholder’s Perspective”***
May 4, 2011

The purpose of today’s hearing is to receive testimony on the benefits that hydroelectricity offer to our nation’s prosperity, the impediments that hydroelectricity generators now face, and the costs that these impediments impose on the family budgets of millions of Americans and on job creation at a time when Americans suffer the most prolonged period of high unemployment since the Depression.

Hydropower is by all accounts the cheapest and cleanest electricity available to modern technology. Its cost is typically estimated at between a half-cent and three cents per kilowatt hour, compared with more than 14-cents per kilowatt hour for solar power. It produces zero air emissions.

And yet, no major hydro-electric facility has been built in many years, and our existing facilities are being bled dry by endless litigation and regulatory obstacles that result in major increases in electricity prices and chronic shortages of electricity.

Earlier this year, this subcommittee heard from the federal agencies charged with producing and delivering hydropower. It became painfully clear that crushing new costs continue to be heaped onto our electricity bills from over-regulation, water use restrictions and mandated use of so-called alternative energy sources. Worse, it became apparent that there are no plans actually being implemented to increase our hydro-electric generation through construction of major facilities.

We see around us the wreckage of these retrograde policies. California, which boasts of being on the cutting edge of this folly, now suffers the highest electricity prices in the continental United States, chronic shortage of capacity, per capita electricity consumption that is now lower than Guam and Aruba, and an economy that leads the nation – from behind. This must not become America’s future.

Our water and power pioneers had the vision of constructing large multi-purpose facilities to “make the desert bloom” and to provide low cost, emissions-free energy. The cheap and abundant hydroelectricity generated in the West’s federal dams played a major role in producing the armaments and food needed to defeat our enemies in World War II. And it laid the foundation for the explosive economic growth and prosperity of the western United States in the post-war years.

This Administration purports to support hydropower through press releases, yet actions speak louder than words:

It continues to pursue the destruction of four hydroelectric dams on the Klamath that produce enough electricity for more than 150,000 homes. The capital cost is more than half a billion dollars, on top of crushing replacement costs, on top of the loss of the Iron Gate Fish Hatchery that releases 5 million salmon smolt each year.

It continues to fund extremist organizations like the one invited by the minority party today, whose President has said the destruction of these dams would be a model for the demolition of four additional dams on the Snake River that produce enough electricity for 1.1 million homes – adding a half-billion dollars per year just in replacement costs.

It continues to pursue high flow spillage from the Glen Canyon Dam that wastes millions of dollars of lost electricity production and ironically increases predator populations that devour endangered humpback chub. Upstream, it has its sights on the Aspinall Unit in western Colorado.

We will hear today that thirty percent of the electricity bills of families in the Pacific Northwest are just to meet environmental regulations.

Protecting endangered species is a worthy goal and worthy goals need to be pursued with common sense and sound science, not left-wing ideology and junk science. We need to ask whether the enormous wealth that has been consumed by these policies has made any significant contribution to enhancing endangered populations compared to far less expensive and effective alternatives, including predator control, increasing overall water supplies and hatchery production. As far as I can tell, the principal beneficiaries of current policies have been the law-firms and environmental fundraising organizations -- and the principal victims have been families and workers who face a dismal future of rationing, shortages, prohibitively expensive water and power and a dying economy.

It is the purpose of these hearings to begin moving the pendulum back toward sensible and proven policies that built our hydro-electric infrastructure. Today, we will hear from leading experts from outside the beltway whose work is dedicated to providing for the needs of a growing population. Their insights on hydropower policy will provide this subcommittee with guidance to restore the federal government as a positive force for prosperity, abundance and plenty once again.