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U.S. House of Representatives
“H.R. 6247—the “Savings Our Dams and Hydropower Development and Jobs Act of 2012”
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I would like to thank Chairman Hastings and the entire Natural Resource Committee for this opportunity to appear before you today. I see today’s hearing as an opportunity to launch a serious discussion on the roles of dams and hydro electric power in this region as well as the rest of the United States.

Like most people in the farming community, I have an inherent love of nature and all places wild. I understand Mother Nature and work with her to find sustainable solutions to grow food. I’m able to recharge my batteries after a busy growing season by finding seclusion in backpacking, hunting, rafting or my favorite, fly fishing. This closeness and partnership with nature gives us in the farming community insight into pragmatic solutions on how to balance man and nature. The current operation of the Columbia and Snake River systems is a good example of balancing the needs of man and the needs of nature. Fish populations have rebounded, habitat has improved, and food production and power generation have continued.

To meet the future demand for food and energy, it is imperative that we begin to lay the immediate ground work to expand water storage and hydropower generation. I believe it’s naïve to think that we can feed an additional two billion people and reduce our reliance on fossil fuels without growing our portfolio of water storage and hydropower. While there are several provisions of this Bill, my comments will be directed to those provisions that most affect food production.

The Role of Dams in Food Production

Dams play a critical role in the production of food for this country and for others who are unable to feed themselves. I’d like to quickly touch on the obvious benefits they play.

Irrigation Water

Just as everyone in this room has to water their home gardens, we too have to water our crops. There is no better place in the world to grow potatoes than here in the Columbia Basin. The average potato yield in this country is just over 20 tons per acre. The average yields in the Columbia Basin are 50% higher than that, but even that number is misleading because a significant portion of the crop is harvested early to meet market demands, which in turn, sacrifices higher yields. There are several farms here in the Columbia Basin that have produced over 50 tons/acre. No one in the world can produce more food per acre, with fewer inputs, than here in the Columbia Basin. But 80 years ago, no one knew that, until we added water. The creation of the Columbia Basin Irrigation Project allowed the desert to bloom and created sustainable farming and economic development to some of the most depressed counties in the State.

Power Generation

Farmers rely on cost effective, reliable, energy to produce their crops. An average potato field requires various pumps, fans, and motors to move water and keep the crop cool in storage. Potato and other food processors also rely on low cost hydro power. Washington agriculture can compete in a global market place because of our low cost hydro power.

Transportation

The dams of the Columbia and Snake River system provide the most cost effective way of transporting many agricultural products. The use of barges on the river system saves on wear and tear of our highways and also has the fewest emissions compared to other modes of transportation.

Economic Benefits of Irrigation

There are currently 165,000 acres of potatoes produced in Washington State, over 90% of them grown here in the Columbia Basin. The ability to deliver the precise amount of irrigation precisely when the plant needs it, has allowed us to produce high yields and high quality. This has attracted many food processors to the area which add value to the crop. Almost 90% of the potato crop in Washington State is processed into value added products. This large amount of value added business has made the economic value of the potato crop rise from the farm gate value of \$750 million to over \$4.6 billion. The potato industry is also responsible for over 23,000 jobs in the State. All this economic activity occurs from just one crop of potatoes. All because we have access to irrigation water that is stored behind dams that produce clean and cost effective hydro electric power. Without access to this irrigation water, our industry would be approximately 1/10 of its current size with little to no additional value added processing.

Future Water and Electrical Needs

World population current stands at just over 7 billion people. The US Census Bureau predicts that world population will reach 8 billion in the year 2027, and 9 billion in 2046. The irrigation waters that dams provide will be even more critical in the future. It is not going to be an easy task to feed an additional 2 billion people, especially since a large portion of the population in developing countries will be moving from poverty into a bulging middle class. This rise in economic stature will spur a large increase in the demand for protein, which will require an even higher level of crop production. It would be naive to think we can meet the future demand for food without new water storage.

Electrical demand will continue to grow as the world slowly transitions away from fossil fuels and more and more households utilize electrical products and vehicles. Hydropower will play a critical role in power generation and stable power management.

The effects of potential climate change will also require the use of dams to mitigate potential impacts to society. Climate change models in the PNW show that we will have similar precipitation but in the form of more rain and less snow pack. The models also predict that the snowpack will melt sooner which is very detrimental to peak water, power, and stream flow demands in July and August. Water storage projects are going to be critical in mitigating impacts to food production, fish needs, and power generation.

Water storage and hydropower are also critical for integrating other renewable power sources like wind and solar.

Financing Projects

We are very supportive of the provision in the Bill that allows non-federal parties to complete studies and finance projects. It's obvious that the federal budget has little to no room to meet the repair and replacement needs of existing infrastructure in this country. This situation makes it very difficult to fund any new projects. Provisions to provide more private investments will be needed to meet the infrastructure needs of this country. A good example of this is a local effort to fund \$700 million of a \$775 million project in the Odessa Sub Area. Local land owners will form Local Improvement Districts and sell bonds or seek private loans to fund the water delivery infrastructure needed in this area rather than asking Congress to pay for the full construction costs up front with 50 year repayment terms.

Authorizing Hydropower Development on Existing Water Projects

The irrigation districts and Bureau of Reclamation manage thousands of miles of man-made canals and other water delivery structures. Streamlining the process to site small scale hydro projects on these structures is an easy way to increase clean hydro production with little to no environmental issues.

On behalf of the Washington State Potato Commission and the Family Farm Alliance, I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to offer comments on the value of water storage projects and hydropower facilities. I sincerely hope that my comments illustrate the importance of irrigation water and hydropower to food production.

About the Washington State Potato Commission

The Washington State Potato Commission (WSPC) is a grower organization with oversight provided by the Washington State Department of Agriculture. The primary focus of the WSPC is to address concerns that may affect the sustainability of potato farming in Washington State and to provide vision to address future sustainability concerns.

About the Family Farm Alliance

The Family Farm Alliance (Alliance) is a grassroots organization of family farmers, ranchers, irrigation districts and allied industries in 16 Western states. The Alliance is focused on one mission: To ensure the availability of reliable, affordable irrigation water supplies to Western farmers and ranchers. We are also committed to the fundamental proposition that Western irrigated agriculture must be preserved and protected for a host of economic, sociological, environmental and national security reasons – many of which are often overlooked in the context of other national policy decisions.

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