July 7, 2006 presentation by Sid Morrison on behalf of the Yakima Basin Storage Alliance and Energy-Northwest.

Morrison is a former member of Congress, 1981 through 1992, from the 4 th District of Washington. He chairs the Boards of both the organizations listed above, and both have a vital interest in the management of the Columbia River and it's tributaries.

The Yakima Basin Storage Alliance is a broadly based group interested in assuring a future for the Yakima River Basin, a 100 year-old Bureau of Reclamation project that is suffering dramatically from climate changes that inconsistently bring high mountain snow to feed the reservoirs that supply the water for fish, irrigation, municipal and industrial use, and recreation.

Energy-Northwest in a Joint Operating Agency under Washington State law that supplies electrical energy to it's public power member utilities at cost. It operates a nuclear power plant, wind farms, solar farm, hydro projects, and other energy activities.

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MR CHAIRMAN, and members of the Water and Power Sub-Committee: I welcome you here today to the 2/3 of the State of Washington that does not live up to the title of the Evergreen State. The Cascade Mountain Range, a chain of volcanic fire, does a thorough job of holding the moisture-laden clouds from the Pacific Ocean to the west of us, and Congressman Hastings and your Vice-Chair Congresswoman McMorris do a great job of representing our very intense interest in water, and fish, and the price of power in this dry part of the state.

My thesis for this hearing is based on long-term interest and involvement in water issues, and this may surprise you, I am here not to complain about the high cost of electricity because of our need to nurture our cultural icon, the salmon, but to propose a solution that works for both. What we are doing now doesn't work; the price of power spirals upward and we are not making the best investments in reaching the goal of restoring the salmon resource.

My frustration with the status quo is two-fold: (1) The Endangered Species Act was intended by it's authors to be fine-tuned over time, but because of political pressures, it remains inflexible and inaccurate, missing the target in finding the most workable answers, and (2) because of past failures by the Executive and Legislative branches (including me), the management of the River system is shifting to the Judicial branch.

Let me spend these precious moments with you describing what is happening here in the Basin of the Columbia River, and what can be done about it. I will use the tributary just to the northwest of this hearing as an example of the opportunity that is ours if we will just think big.

The Yakima Basin Project was undertaken by the federal government through the Bureau of Reclamation in the late 1800s. It was their dream to make the desert bloom back in the days when they were bold enough to have such dreams. They saw high mountains with year-round snow in the Cascades, and the potential for reservoirs to catch the runoff, feeding the rivers that fed irrigation canals, producing crops that fed people around the world.

It worked. The population of the three county area involved grew from 25,000 to over half a million, and the products produced are world famous and create a very favorable balance of trade. But the weather has gradually changed. When I served in Congress, we were beginning to see the shortage of dark clouds on the horizon, resulting in one drought year out of ten. We scrambled to find additional reservoir capacity and put in place conservation measures so water usage could be more effective, a continuing and successful effort. Minimum flow requirements and stream management techniques were increased to protect salmon during critical times in their life cycle.

The volume of precipitation hasn't declined with the climate change we have incrementally seen over the past 50 years. However, freezing levels in the Cascades have moved up, and the mountains no longer hold the snow so it will fill our existing reservoirs the three times per year that is required for a normal water year. Congressman Hastings now inherits one drought year out of four, with a multi-billion dollar economic impact, and all too little water for salmon production on the Yakima.

Now, let me tell you the fish story. The Yakima River used to host the return of 500,000 to 800,000 salmon per year late in the 19 th century. Scientists have proclaimed that the Yakima and it's tributaries have the greatest potential for salmon recovery of any river system "in the lower 48." The Yakama Indian Nation is increasingly being recognized for it's expertise in the operation of supplementation facilities (these used to be called "hatcheries"…and the goal is to strengthen and expand wild stocks of salmon). The recovery stage is set.

What is missing is water. We can invest all kinds of ratepayer and federal money in bringing back the endangered salmon, improving and expanding habitat, and it all has some benefit, but, I repeat, it doesn't work without water.

So, how does all of this weave together to provide an answer to the high cost of fish? A group of us have formed the Yakima Basin Storage Alliance to look for water supply answers in our area. Our plan is called "Black Rock", an inter-basin pumped storage reservoir, utilizing water pumped out of the Columbia River when it is surplus to all other needs. This reservoir water is released through the summer season to satisfy the needs of existing irrigated acreage with a least 70 percent of court-proven legal water rights. The existing Yakima Basin Project, with it's five high mountain reservoirs, then can be managed for fish production and greatly reduced other needs in the three-county Basin. The goal is a "normative" River as flowed a hundred years ago, with some modifications to make it even kinder and gentler for fish than Mother Nature provided.

Is this the way to get the best results for the investment in an endangered resource? We think so, and Congressman Hastings, backed by other House members and our two Senators, particularly Senator Cantwell, have been heroic in finding resources to match the state in funding a Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) Feasibility Study that is in it's third year and will be completed in 2008.

During this study, we found an interesting problem in the Principles and Guidelines the BOR must follow in determining the economic value of producing salmon. They figure the increased number of salmon resulting from the Black Rock Reservoir concept, multiply it by pounds per fish, and calculate what that tonnage does to the retail price. The problem is that northwest ratepayers paid $695 million last year in increased power costs and water spilled to help salmon recovery, and no one I have talked with can recall getting a fish out of the deal. Next year it could be a billion dollars, and it seems to me that is the economic value of replacing the salmon, in addition to the cultural and religious value to the Yakamas and other Columbia River native Americans.

The Columbia River doesn't suffer as much as the smaller river systems I have just described. It's roots are in the higher mountains of the Rockies, and it has capacity to store some water in Lake Roosevelt behind Grand Coulee Dam. However, when we get rain instead of snow, and the tributaries of the Columbia swell with water that can't be managed for fish or power or the economy, everyone suffers.

Let me slip on a different hat for a moment that relates to high water and the high price of power. The Columbia Generating Station, a nuclear plant just a few miles up the Columbia River producing 1,150 megawatts for the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA), gets a phone call when the river system is running high asking that we put the power plant on "economic dispatch". This is an expensive process throttling back a nuclear plant, built to run most efficiently for years at 100 percent power, because "we can't sell the power". What it also says is that someone can't control the River for a broad base of benefits, or won't.

The high cost of power that brings this Committee here today is not because it costs more for energy production in this corner of the nation. Looking at this historically, the opposite is true. Federal leadership and planning, augmented by local public power utilities, have harnessed the water flowing to the Pacific in the Columbia and Snake Rivers, used that energy to produce the aluminum it took to win World War II, and to irrigate millions of acres of productive cropland. Power rates here are the envy of much of the country, even with the expensive modifications made to turbines, fish ladders, and collection systems to safely transport salmon both up and down the rivers as they play out their fascinating life cycle.

The increased cost of power is primarily the result of investments we make to meet the requirements of the Endangered Species Act. The northwest is environmentally conscious and more willing than most to protect our natural resources, but it must be, in the long haul, efficient, and targeted to do the most good. Like the dreams of a century ago, the federal process must be far-sighted and effective, instead of sending us an ever larger bill year after year with little to show for the investment.

The options of water storage when there is excess makes sense, both to generate electricity and to support fish recovery and production. The federal government should either lead this effort or get out of the way.