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Testimony
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Oversight Field Hearing on
Keeping the Columbia/Snake a Working River System
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, my name is Norm Semanko. I am the Executive Director and General Counsel for the Idaho Water Users Association (IWUA). I appreciate the invitation to testify before you today.

Originally formed in 1938 as the Idaho Reclamation Association, IWUA is a non-profit corporation representing more than 300 irrigation districts, canal companies, water districts, ground water districts, public and municipal water providers, hydroelectric companies, aquaculture facilities, agribusinesses, professional firms and individuals, all dedicated to the wise and efficient use of our water resources. Our members deliver irrigation water to more than two and a half million acres in Idaho. Many of our members also rely upon the power and transportation benefits provided by the current river system.

IWUA is affiliated with the National Water Resources Association, which I currently serve as President. I am also a member of the Western States Water Council, which advises the Western Governors' Association on water-related matters, and a member of the Advisory Committee for the Family Farm Alliance, a grass-roots organization representing farmers and ranchers that receive water from Bureau of Reclamation projects in the West. Finally, I represent the Coalition for Idaho Water, a broad-based collection of agricultural groups, businesses, local governments and others, formed to defend Idaho's water from legal threats posed by the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

You have asked that I address my views on the value of the multiple-use Columbia/Snake River system, potential threats to it, and ways to balance economic needs and environmental protection within the region that depends on the system. I am pleased to do that.

The Value of the Multiple-Use Columbia/Snake River System

The vast system of dams, reservoirs and canals built by the Bureau of Reclamation since the passage of the Reclamation Act in 1902 has truly made the desert bloom throughout the Pacific Northwest. In Idaho, Washington and Oregon, vast tracts of irrigated agriculture have contributed to our nation's economy, provided a steady and dependable supply of food and fiber, and helped create a way of life that helps define who we are as a people. As originally expressed by an optimistic farmer's sign posted on a desert ranch in the Boise Project before the first water deliveries were made to the area, we still "have faith in God and U.S. Reclamation".

These water projects provide many other benefits to our region. The livestock industry benefits from the water provided by Reclamation. Significant power is generated by these facilities, helping fuel our regional economy. Flood damage is prevented by Reclamation projects, as well. Recreational opportunities are provided in the reservoirs and on our rivers because of Reclamation projects.

For the benefit of the Subcommittee, I have provided copies of the "Story of" several Reclamation projects on the Columbia/Snake River System, summarizing the project-by-project benefits in several areas of the region. The overall value of the Bureau projects to the region is overwhelming.

Here are just some of the numbers.

The annual value of the irrigated crops in the Minidoka, Palisades, and Boise Projects in Idaho is nearly \$1.2 billion dollars. For the Columbia Basin Project in Washington, the annual crop value is \$630 million. It is \$700 million in the Yakima Project in Washington and almost \$100 million in the Owyhee Project in Oregon and Idaho. That's more than \$2.5 billion per year of crop value in the region, in just those six Reclamation projects in Idaho, Washington and Oregon. There is another \$1 billion annually in benefits from the livestock industry derived from these same projects.

And the hydroelectric power benefits? Almost \$1 billion per year; again, just for these six Reclamation projects. These aren't the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dams on the Lower Snake and Columbia Rivers; just the Reclamation projects.

The benefits to the public provided through flood control are likewise immense. Again, just for these six Reclamation projects, there is nearly \$100 million per year prevented in flood damage in the region.

Some would argue that these dams have crippled our ecosystems and decimated our fish runs. The facts just don't bear this out.

The amount of water arriving at Lower Granite Dam each year from Idaho has remained virtually unchanged over the last century. Summer flows have actually increased because of regulated flows released from behind the dams.

So what impacts do the dams have on fishing? It's no secret that flows in dam-controlled rivers are more stable and more predictable, providing superior fishing opportunities with long, sustained releases through the summer. As the outdoor reporter for the Idaho Statesman recently observed, "Dam-controlled rivers are more predictable because dam operators can control the flows. If you plan to fish a river, those are a better bet than free-flowing rivers." "Anglers: High water is everywhere", Idaho Statesman, May 26, 2005.

There is also more dependable water for rafting and other recreational pursuits because of the reservoirs and steady releases into the river during the summer period. For the six projects that I previously mentioned, there are more than six million recreation visits annually to the reservoirs and rivers that are regulated by Reclamation. The annual economic benefit is about \$170 million.

Potential Threats to the System

Make no mistake about it. As we sit here today, our dams and reservoirs, our managed river systems, and our entire way of life are under direct assault by extremist environmental groups.

These groups have suggested that Reclamation reservoirs should be drained in a vain and pointless attempt to "save" the salmon. Most recently, a coalition of environmental groups has asked the federal district court in Oregon to draw down reservoirs and drain others through flow augmentation, in order to increase the velocity of the lower Snake and Columbia Rivers by ten percent this summer. A hearing on this request is scheduled for this Friday, June 10 in Portland, in the aftermath of the judge's May 26 decision striking down the biological opinion for the Federal Columbia River Power System (FCRPS) dams.

This motion threatens to wreak havoc on our region by crippling our river transportation and power systems, taking badly needed water supplies away from farmers and ranchers, and even stealing water from our municipalities, resident fisheries, and local recreation. As a State and as a region, we cannot tolerate these kinds of devastating impacts this summer – or ever.

From a hydrologic standpoint, the motion is without merit and should be withdrawn immediately. At the time the motion was made in March, the summer flow projections at Lower Granite on the lower Snake River were at 46% of normal. Today, the updated summer flow projections are at 70% of normal. The bottom line: the flow at Lower Granite is projected to be at least 50% higher than it was at the time the motion was made. In short, the dire, low water conditions that led to the filing of the motion have improved. Mother Nature has more than granted the requested relief of 10% already.

It is no secret that the environmental groups do not covet our water so much as they seek to impose pain upon every sector of the region until we all support the ultimate goal of these radical groups – removal of the dams. As the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals recognized recently, such a drastic step cannot be taken by the federal agencies, nor can it be ordered by any federal judge. Only Congress can deauthorize the federal dams and order their removal. The environmental groups continue to do all they can to create a political constituency for their cause.

In a separate lawsuit, several of the same environmental groups have directly challenged the continued operation of the Bureau of Reclamation projects in the Upper Snake River Basin, above Hells Canyon. This includes the Minidoka, Palisades and Boise Projects in Idaho, the Owyhee Project in Oregon and Idaho, and several others, with a total active storage capacity of more than seven million acre-feet of water. If recognized by the court, the environmentalists' misguided claims could have resulted in the denial of water for Idaho citizens, for the purpose of meeting in-river flow objectives for the salmon that cannot possibly be justified. Since the action was filed, a new biological opinion has been issued for the projects, rendering the motions of the environmental groups moot. Nonetheless, the threat continues to hang over Idaho and Oregon farmers, ranchers, businesses and communities.

As if that is not enough, environmental groups have also targeted the three hydroelectric dams in Hells Canyon, owned

and operated by Idaho Power Company and licensed by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC). As part of the current relicensing process, they have asked FERC to order Idaho Power to study decommissioning, or removal, of the dams in order to “Restore the Canyon”. These dams supply over 75% of the hydroelectric power generated by Idaho Power, upon which Idaho businesses, irrigators and the general public rely for a firm supply of power. Obviously, it is ludicrous to talk about removing these dams. Yet, we expect a full-blown battle in front of FERC on this question.

The same groups have also proposed passage and reintroduction of salmon protected under the Endangered Species Act, into the Snake River and its tributaries above Hells Canyon. Comparable estimates of the impacts that this would cause to farmers and ranchers in the Upper Snake River Basin, in order to comply with the ESA and other federal laws, are in the \$600 per acre range. The actual costs are likely to be much higher. These impacts would also be felt by businesses and municipalities. There would be direct and substantial impacts on the continued operation of the Reclamation projects in Idaho and Oregon. The existing biological opinion for our projects would likely be thrown out in order to evaluate the impacts of the projects on the listed fish transplanted into our area. We cannot withstand this kind of hit. Again, this argument is likely to play itself out in front of FERC.

In addition to the water projects in southern and eastern Idaho, the FCRPS litigation likewise threatens water levels in locally important waters such as Dworshak Reservoir, Cascade Lake, and Lake Pend Oreille.

Balancing Economic Needs and Environmental Protection

Any solution to the current set of problems in the Columbia/Snake River system needs to include a strong dose of common sense. A good place to start is with the actual number of fish in the river system.

Over the past several years, salmon and steelhead numbers are up -- significantly. You would think that this would be good news to the environmental community. Instead, they refuse to acknowledge the increased runs, choosing to characterize them as some kind of short-term spike that will soon return to the “extinction vortex” that they once so boldly

predicted would end with the salmon’s demise by 2017. Needless to say, that prediction is not looking too good these days.

The federal government has refused to include healthy, returning populations of hatchery fish in their counts of salmon abundance. Despite a successful lawsuit in federal district court, recognizing that genetically identical salmon that swim side-by-side must be treated the same under the ESA, the shell game continues. On the one hand, the federal government says that the fish are threatened and endangered, even when considering hatchery populations. On the other hand, they say that there is a “surplus” of fish and that it is permissible to harvest them.

As a result of these failures, another lawsuit is likely to be filed in the near future, challenging the federal government’s continued failure to comply with the law. IWUA and the Coalition for Idaho Water will both be parties to that lawsuit; I will proudly carry the banner as co-counsel with the Pacific Legal Foundation, the non-profit public interest law firm that successfully prosecuted the previous hatchery lawsuit.

By counting the hatchery fish, as well as the non-ocean going fish that are also genetically identical to the anadromous fish, we should be able to distinguish between those stocks that are actually in trouble and those that have suffered from an impermissibly artificial distinction between so-called “natural” and “unnatural” fish.

Recognition of the increased fish runs and inclusion of hatchery fish should eventually result in delisting of at least some of these stocks, and an increased ability to harvest them. It should also serve to remove some of the restrictions that exist in many sectors of our region under the ESA.

This can be done without removing the dams and without draining Idaho and other areas of our region.

Another needed and long overdue step is to improve and modernize the ESA. Many good ideas exist for making the Act better and are under active consideration, not just by Congress, but by many stakeholders and other interested groups. I applaud the House Resources Committee for the leadership that it has provided on this issue and look forward to favorable consideration of legislation by Congress to amend the ESA in the near future so that it can work better for the benefit of all Idahoans.

By taking some common sense steps, and looking at all of the facts, we can preserve the tremendous benefits of the Columbia/Snake River system, as a working river, while also enjoying continued salmon and steelhead returns for generations to come.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you once again for the opportunity to testify.