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House Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries
Hearing on the Northwest at risk: the environmentalist's effort to destroy navigation, transportation,
and access to reliable power

Chairman Bentz, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Michelle Hennings, and I am the Executive Director of the Washington Association of Wheat Growers. I am speaking today on behalf of Washington wheat growers and personally as a wheat farmer from eastern Washington.

The Washington Association of Wheat Growers represents over 4,000 producers across the state of Washington who rely on the Columbia Snake River System, and the Lower Snake River Dams in particular, for their livelihoods.

Washington is the fourth-largest agricultural exporter of wheat in the nation, and in the top 20 for overall exports of agricultural goods¹. Washington's agriculture industry, and its ability to produce and export products globally, are critical to the state's economy. A significant volume of food and agriculture products from other states including soybeans, wheat, and corn are exported through Washington state ports each year. Once these pass-through exports are combined with Washington-grown or processed exports, the total value reaches over \$23 billion².

Farmers, including myself and my family, rely on barge transportation to ship goods to market. Not only is the Snake River System critical for Washington state, but farmers across the country rely on its transportation benefits as well. In fact, more than 55 percent of all U.S. wheat exports move through the

¹ *Annual State Agricultural Exports Interactive Chart*. USDA ERS - Annual State Agricultural Exports. (n.d.). <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/state-agricultural-trade-data/annual-state-agricultural-exports/>

² *Exports statistics*. Statistics | Washington State Department of Agriculture. (2022). <https://agr.wa.gov/departments/business-and-marketing-support/international/statistics>

Columbia Snake River system. Specifically, 10 percent of wheat that is exported from the United States passes through the four locks and dams along the Lower Snake River³.

Any disruption to the Lower Snake River System could hurt existing relationships with trade partners. Over the last several decades, our industry has worked to build relationships with customers around the world, using our world class inland waterways infrastructure to safely and efficiently move agricultural products. Breaching the dams could significantly hurt our ability to consistently provide a cost-competitive, high value food product compared to our competitors in Canada, Australia, Russia, and elsewhere.

Droughts affect the state's agricultural production and have become more frequent in recent years. As a result, irrigation is necessary for the production of most crops, especially east of the Cascades. In fact, the local Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) office estimates over 50,000 acres of land are irrigated from the reservoirs created by the four Lower Snake River Dams⁴. In addition, even in places with high rainfall, such as western Washington, irrigation still serves a critical purpose as the majority of the precipitation occurs in the winter months and summers tend to be dryer⁵.

While there have been claims that benefits from the dams can be replaced, the bottom line is there is insufficient alternative transportation infrastructure to replace the barge shipment of wheat in the Pacific Northwest (PNW) region to export markets. In addition to insufficient railroad infrastructure, ongoing operational and service issues continue to restrict existing shipping capacity by rail.

³ *Facts about U.S. wheat exports and the Columbia Snake River system*. U.S. Wheat Associates. (2022, March 15). <https://www.uswheat.org/wheatletter/facts-about-u-s-wheat-exports-and-the-columbia-snake-river-system/>

⁴ US Army Corps of Engineers. (n.d.). Water Supply. https://www.nww.usace.army.mil/Portals/28/docs/library/2002%20LSR%20study/DREW%20Products/water_supply.pdf?ver=2019-06-19-164751-430

⁵ *Water management: Food systems: Washington State University*. Food Systems. (n.d.). <https://foodsystems.wsu.edu/ecological-soil-management/water-management-2/>

It's also important to note, barges are 30 percent more fuel efficient than rail and 78 percent more efficient than trucks⁶. Additionally, barges are the only mode of transportation out of those three to improve fuel efficiency consistently, based on a National Waterways Foundation study⁷.

While Washington wheat growers strongly oppose breaching the four Lower Snake River Dams, it is important to understand that we strongly support efforts to ensure the long-term health of salmon populations. As there is no definitive science behind dam breaching being a “silver bullet” solution for salmon recovery, we believe that state and federal efforts would be better focused on building upon efforts proven to positively impact salmon populations. More specifically, we support investments made at the federal and state level including fish habitat restoration, toxin reduction, predator abatement, and expanding the state-of-the-art fish passages that these dams already have, instead of eliminating them. This is the kind of real work and investment of tax dollars that is needed to help our salmon and our region survive and thrive.

For the younger generation hoping to start or takeover a family-owned farm, the benefits provided by the dams, especially the irrigation and transportation benefits, are critical to the economic viability of the business. If the dams were to be breached, the higher transportation costs could drive many family farms out of business.

The importance of the Columbia Snake River System for the agriculture industry as a whole, and in particular for wheat growers across Washington, cannot be overstated. I look forward to discussing the importance of the four Lower Snake River Dams with you today. Thank you.

⁶ National Waterways Foundation. (n.d.). *Waterways: Better for the Environment, Better for Communities*. National Waterways Foundation.
<https://nationalwaterwaysfoundation.org/about/ourmission#:~:text=Barges%3A%20Most%20Fuel%20Efficient,a%20single%20gallon%20of%20fuel.>

⁷ Center for Ports and Waterways, & Texas A&M Transportation Institute. (2022, January). *National Waterways Foundation. A Modal Comparison of Domestic Freight Transportation Effects on the General Public: 2001-2019*.
<https://nationalwaterwaysfoundation.org/file/28/tti%202022%20final%20report%202001-2019%201.pdf>