

DEDICATED PEOPLE

WHO CARE

ABOUT FARM FAMILIES

ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT

ABOUT THE COMMUNITIES WE SERVE

509.397.4355
800.873.8666
www.mcgregor.com

PO Box 740
Colfax WA 99111



The Northwest at Risk: the environmentalist's efforts to destroy navigation, transportation, and access to reliable power.

Oversight Field Hearing Testimony Before House Committee on Natural Resources,
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife & Fisheries
Monday, June 26, 2023: Richland WA

Honorable Chairman Bentz,

Pulling Together, We Can Have Healthy Rivers and A Healthy Economy

Good afternoon. I'm Alex McGregor, chairman of The McGregor Company, an agricultural retailer, and managing partner of McGregor Land and Livestock, a wheat and livestock ranch now celebrating its 140th year.

The Inland Pacific Northwest is an agricultural cornucopia. From rolling hills of wheat to arid lowlands transformed with the waters of the Columbia and Snake into bountiful and diverse crops, we play a vital role in feeding the nation and the world. People around the globe have depended on the crops we grow for a very long time—since 1868 when the first British ship left Portland headed for Liverpool with a full load of flour and grain. Within three decades 136 vessels left our gateway in a single year, with more than 32 million bushels of wheat onboard, headed for the United Kingdom, San Francisco and Los Angeles but with markets across the Pacific, particularly Japan and China, starting to dominate.

No wonder that the Northwest economy is more trade-dependent per capita than any other region. Ninety percent of Washington wheat heads for export annually—the river terminals that line this gateway handle more of it than any other port in the nation. Representative Newhouse reminds audiences that if you've had French fries anywhere on the globe, they likely got their start in our irrigated fields here. More than \$8 billion in grown or processed food exports in Washington alone in 2022¹.

A maritime superhighway, the Columbia-Snake River System, authorized by the United States Congress, is a keystone to the efficient transport network upon which so much depends. The exports from this state are but part of the picture—an additional \$14 billion of wheat, soybeans (#2 gateway in the nation for them), corn and much more arrives here from states across the northern tier and the Midwest. Closer to home, tugboat companies ship over eight million tons of cargo—not only grain but many other products like ethanol in double-hulled barges to Portland, refined liquid products up and down the river, wood chips, paper, wind turbine blades,

¹ <https://agr.wa.gov/departments/business-and-marketing-support/international/statistics>

even municipal solid waste from our urban neighbors is river-bound. Exchange an efficient, low carbon, timely transport system with some sort of makeshift alternative added to an already over-burdened road and rail network—and you’ve cooked a recipe for trouble. And more than 30,000 visitors annually are transported by cruise lines—an economic shot in the arm for many communities that would likely cease without the dams.

Like thousands of other wheat growers, my family trucks our grain to lower Snake River terminals. Shipments must be timely, delays harmful to millers across the Pacific, with orders to fill, and hungry people who depend upon us—60% of U.S. wheat bound for export leaves our river docks, 50% of wheat for international food programs, 100% of U.S wheat for war-ravaged Yemen. Joe Anderson, a Palouse country grower and Port of Lewiston Commissioner, states that “Thanks to the river system, farmers can now load a barge and have it transferred for export in Portland in as little as two days.” Compare that to rail, which struggled mightily last year, with more than 142,000 shipments delayed eleven days or more across the nation during the first quarter alone. The National Grain and Feed Association said its members who depend upon rail “have had to shut down mills or cut off sales because they have run out of grain while awaiting deliveries.”

Nor can growers wait for fertilizer deliveries when crops must be nourished and seeded and delays cost yield potential for the next harvest. My family business, in the peak of busy season last fall with supplies tight, called for 4.5 million more gallons of liquid fertilizer, on short notice, for farm families who needed it right away—barges and tugs were the only hope, and they came through for us.

While we ship by rail, too, we were stunned when fertilizer manufacturers upon whom we depend were told by the Union Pacific to cut their shipments by 20%—warning that “non-compliance” would result “in the embargo of its facilities.”² The railroad also notified shippers it was parking some of its own rail cars on sidings, taking them out of service until demand slackened. Former Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Jewel Bronaugh told the Surface Transportation Board³ of poor service and unreasonable rates from the big outfits: “Farmers struggle to make ends meet, consumers pay higher prices at the grocery store and the United States becomes less competitive on the global market.” Last month Ag Secretary Tom Vilsack thanked the STB for cracking down on embargoes but stated rail service “remains inadequate and unreliable for many agricultural shippers.”⁴

What about trucks? From the lower Snake River grain terminals to Pasco would require 150,000 semi-tractors annually, 411 trucks per day, to haul the grain now shipped by barge. The notion that drivers would be told to stop in the Tri-Cities, then unload onto a barge, as dam opponents have suggested, defies logic. Studies of Northwest rail, the Washington Grain Train strategic plan and railroaders themselves agree that they’re not much interested ----unit trains and long hauls, the longer the better, pay the bills. Load that grain onto a truck in Lewiston and on that truck it

² <https://www.cfindustries.com/newsroom/2022/union-pacific-shipping-restrictions>

³ Surface Transportation Board Docket No. EP 770, April 26, 2022

⁴ [USDA AMS Secretary Vilsack Letter on Rail Service Issues, May 12, 2023](#)

will stay all the way to our ocean ports. And if we tried to jam millions of tons more cargo onto trucks when the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration warns of crashes at a “crisis level,”⁵ we’d clog the I-84 freeway to Portland and fill the skies of the Columbia River Gorge Scenic Byway with diesel smoke enroute. We couldn’t find drivers anyway—they’re chronically in short supply regionally and nationally.

Meanwhile NOAA Fisheries warns of a “horrendous situation”—the potential for 90% losses of salmon and steelhead at sea: “The reality of where we are right now with the amount of CO₂ we are pumping into the atmosphere,” fisheries ecologist Lisa Crozier states. A situation we’d only make worse if we allowed our dams to be breached and our barges and tugs left parked on a mud bank— EPA’s Emissions Control Laboratory studies show river shipping produces 86% less hydrocarbons than trucks, 80% less than rail, 95% less nitrous oxide than trucks, 71% less than rail.

Time to get out of the courthouse, after two decades, and get with the real world of helping our iconic Northwest fish. As Crozier puts it, “The goal is for people to come together and look for holistic solutions.” By working together, we can make real and lasting progress improving prospects for salmon without endangering livelihoods, our economy, and the world class crops we must transport to a hungry nation and the world. We believe that, pulling together, we can have healthy rivers and a healthy economy. We should accept nothing less.

Thank you.



Alex McGregor, Chairman

⁵ <https://www.nhtsa.gov/press-releases/early-estimate-2021-traffic-fatalities>