

PRESS RELEASE

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Contact: Sean Ellis, (208) 220-5428

***FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE***

Farm Bureau strongly opposes dam removal plan

POCATELLO – Idaho Farm Bureau Federation, the state’s largest farm organization, is strongly opposed to a proposal that would result in the removal of four lower Snake River dams that provide amazing benefits to Idaho and the entire Pacific Northwest region.

Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, last week floated a $33 billion plan that he believes could help endangered salmon populations. The highlight of Simpson’s proposal calls for the removal of the four lower Snake River dams.

This marks the first time a member of the PNW congressional delegation has formally raised the prospect of breaching dams.

The lower four dams on the Snake River produce a significant amount of cheap and environmentally friendly hydroelectric power to the region and are a critical part of a system on the Columbia and Snake rivers that allows wheat farmers, as well as producers of many other commodities, to export their product to the world.

Removing the dams would make the Columbia-Snake River system unnavigable for barges that move wheat, barley and other products to Portland for export.

Barging is the most cost-effective and environmentally friendly way of getting wheat from Idaho and other states to market and the Columbia-Snake system is the third largest grain export gateway in the world.

“These dams are the lifeblood of agriculture in Idaho, Washington, Montana and Oregon,” said IFBF Vice President Richard Durrant, a farmer from Meridian.

The river, combined with its system of dams and locks, provides for the environmentally friendly ability to transport wheat, pulse and other crops to Portland so they can be shipped across the world, he said.

The system also provides for the efficient transportation of fuel, fertilizer and machinery back up the river, which reduces freight costs to businesses and residents in the region.

“As a producer and marketer of Idaho agriculture products, I find it very disheartening to hear that an Idaho congressman would consider breaching the four lower Snake River dams,” Durrant said.

On July 31, three federal agencies – U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and Bonneville Power Administration – reaffirmed their opposition to breaching of the four dams in a final environmental impact statement.

A federal judge ordered the agencies that operate the Columbia-Snake River system to review all reasonable options for operating it in order to minimize the impact on endangered salmon.

Breaching of those dams has long been supported by some environmental groups and that idea has also been long opposed by farm and other groups.

IFBF policy, which was developed by its members at the grassroots level, supports “the continued existence and current usage of all dams on the Columbia and Snake Rivers” and opposes “any efforts to destroy or decrease production of those dams.”

IFBF President Bryan Searle, a farmer from Shelley, said the proposal attempts to put a price tag on the region’s way of life.

Searle said Farm Bureau applauds the congressman for attempting to find a solution that would assist salmon populations but IFBF believes this particular plan is not the right one and would cause significant harm to the PNW economy and way of life.

Idaho Farm Bureau Federation, which represents 80,000 member-families across the state, including at least 11,000 people actively involved in agriculture, stands in opposition to the congressman’s proposal, Searle said.

“Despite what supporters of the plan claim, make no mistake, this is a drastic measure that would forever alter our way of life in the Pacific Northwest, and not for good,” he said. “Idaho Farm Bureau members are adamantly opposed to this proposal.”

While most news stories about Simpson’s proposal were positive toward the idea, the reality is that removal of those dams is opposed by a significant number of organizations and individuals in Idaho, Oregon and Washington.

In response to the proposal, the Pacific Northwest Waterways Association, a non-profit group that represents a diverse coalition of 135 members in Idaho, Washington and Oregon, released a statement saying that “funding for salmon recovery and new energy technologies should not be tied to an extreme measure like breaching the Snake River dams, which provide over 95% effective fish passage and are a critical part of the region’s energy portfolio.”

According to PNWA, about 14 million metric tons of wheat destine for export move through the Columbia-Snake system each year, as well as 8 million metric tons of soybeans, 3 million tons of wood products and 9 million tons of corn.

The proposal was also opposed by a group that represents the thousands of farms in Idaho that grow wheat and barley.

As word about the proposal spreads across the region, “the Idaho Grain Producers Association voices their concerns about such drastic measures,” IGPA leaders stated in a press release.

That release said the river system’s importance to Idaho’s grain growers cannot be overstated.

Wheat is grown in 42 of Idaho’s 44 counties and wheat farmers in Idaho brought in an estimated $525 million in farm-gate revenue in 2020, making wheat the state’s No. 2 crop in that category.

Almost half of Idaho’s wheat is moved by barge down the Columbia-Snake River system to Portland to be exported to foreign customers.

“Barging wheat is the most environmentally friendly mode of transportation available,” the IGPA release states.

Barley ranked as Idaho’s No. 5 crop last year with $274 million in farm-cash receipts and Idaho is the nation’s No. 1 barley producer.

Besides being grown in most parts of the state, wheat and barley are also important parts of many farmers’ crop rotations and both commodities would be severely impacted by removal of the dams.

In the IGPA release, Idaho Grain Producers Association President Jamie Kress, a southeast Idaho farmer, said the 4,500 farm families who grow Idaho wheat and barley rely on the river system to get their crop to market “and it is counter-productive to consider removing dams that produce clean hydropower at a time when our country needs more clean energy production.”

Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho, said that while the issue of helping salmon populations is incredibly complex and he is reviewing Simpson’s proposal and listening to Idahoans from every background on the topic, “my opposition to dam breaching remains unchanged and my commitment to Idaho’s farmers, businesses, sportsmen and recreational users who depend on the existing system holds firm.”

During the 2020 Idaho legislative session, lawmakers overwhelmingly passed a joint memorial that affirms their support for the entire Columbia-Snake River system.

The memorial, which passed 61-3 in the House and by a voice vote in the Senate, states that Idaho opposes the removal of dams on the system.

Simpson’s plan would create a $33 billion “Columbia Basin Fund” to help transition economies and sectors negatively impacted by dam removal.

The congressman’s plan calls for barging on the Snake River to be replaced with additional rail and truck traffic that, according to a study, would result in a significant increase in carbon emissions.

Removing the dams would also have a significant negative impact on power rates in the Pacific Northwest, which currently enjoys some of the very lowest power rates in the nation. The Columbia-Snake River system provides low-cost and clean hydropower to Idaho and the PNW.

According to a statement released by Simpson’s office, the plan includes a “framework for reimagining the Northwest energy landscape….”

“Farm Bureau doesn’t believe that reimagining an energy landscape that provides some of the cheapest energy prices in the nation is a good idea,” Searle said.

While there is no guarantee the plan would provide any real help to salmon populations, it would certainly be bad for agriculture and power rates.

“This plan would remove highly functional run-of-river dams with world-class fish passage that provide fundamental benefits like clean energy and efficient commerce to our region, and put the region on track for higher carbon emissions and an increase in climate change,” PNWA Executive Director Kristin Meira said in a statement. “It is not a responsible use of taxpayer dollars and ultimately is a disservice to our region’s fish.”

A study commissioned by the PNWA and released last January found that dam breaching would increase diesel fuel consumption by almost 5 million gallons per year because barges would be replaced by less efficient truck-to-rail shipments.

It also found that dam breaching would result in an additional 24 million miles of travel per year on county, state and federal roads, and increase grain transportation and storage expenses by 50-100 percent.

The study found that shifting transportation of commodities from barges to truck and rail would increase carbon and other harmful emissions by more than 1.3 million tons per year, which is the equivalent of adding 181,889 passenger cars or 90,365 homes.

According to PNWA, it would take about 35,000 rail cars or 135,000 semi-trucks to move all the cargo that is barged on the Snake River.

Searle said Idaho Farm Bureau Federation supports efforts to recover salmon populations but he said that any federal dollars available for that “should not be used to create new problems for farmers, businesses and others in the PNW who depend on the Columbia-Snake River system.”

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