

Columbia Basin Hydropower Developments

The federal hydropower system is a cornerstone of the Northwest economy and key to a regional low carbon future. Consumer-owned utilities in Oregon receive most or all of their electricity supply from the federal hydropower system, making management of the system a central concern for them and their customers.



In the last few years there have been several developments in different venues related to the management and operation of the federal hydropower system. Though most of these are not directly energy-related — having to do with fish and wildlife protection rather than energy production — tracking all of these developments and understanding if and how they may affect hydropower output can be challenging. With that in mind and in keeping with the Oregon Department of Energy's mission of being a repository of energy-related information for Oregon, the agency has developed this resource to provide information about select federal and state activities that may affect the region's hydropower system.

Columbia Basin Restoration Initiative

The Columbia Basin Restoration Initiative (CBRI) is a strategy developed by the Yakama, Umatilla, Nez Perce, and Warm Springs Tribal Nations and the states of Washington and Oregon (referred to as the "Six Sovereigns") to advance multiple goals for the Columbia Basin.

These goals include:

- Restoring salmon to healthy and abundant levels.
- Ensuring a reliable, clean energy future for the region.
- Supporting economic and climate resilience.
- Restoring the overall ecosystem function of the Basin.
- Honoring long unmet commitments to Tribal Nations.

The Six Sovereigns created and presented the CBRI as a proposal to the federal government as part of stay of litigation mediations in Summer of 2022 regarding litigationⁱ over operations of the federal hydropower system. The CBRI contains six objectives related to these goals and proposed actions to achieve them.

View a [fact sheet about the CBRI](#).

The [full text of the CBRI proposal](#) is also available online.



ⁱ National Wildlife Federation v. National Marine Fisheries Service, 3:01-cv-640-SI (D. Or.) (NWF v. NMFS), Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations v. Bonneville Power Administration, 20-73761 (9th Cir.) (PCFFA v. BPA), Coeur d'Alene Tribe v. Bonneville Power Administration, 20-73762 (9th Cir.), and Spokane Tribe of Indians v. Bonneville Power Administration, 20-73775 (9th Cir.).

Relevance to Lower Snake River Dams

Objective 1(a) of the CBRI calls on the federal government to “complete the actions and investments necessary to secure continuity of services associated with the Lower Snake River (LSR) restoration prior to LSR dam breaching.” The CBRI recognizes that only Congress can authorize breaching of the dams.

Resilient Columbia Basin Agreement

The Resilient Columbia Basin Agreement (RCBA) refers to the [Memorandum of Understanding \(MOU\)](#) filed on December 14, 2023 by the U.S. government, acting through its agencies, the Six Sovereigns, and the National Wildlife Federation et al. Plaintiffs.ⁱⁱ The MOU lays out commitments that the U.S. government made to further the objectives of the CBRI. The Six Sovereigns and the NWF Plaintiffs agreed to stay litigation over the operations of the federal hydropower system for 5-10 years or as long as the MOU remained in effect, to allow the U.S. government to fulfill their commitments and to allow for further advancement of the objectives of the CBRI.

Relevance to Lower Snake River Dams

The U.S. government commitments within the MOU related to the CBRI include the funding and conducting of studies of the existing services of the Lower Snake River Dams in order to determine what investments would be necessary to maintain continuity of those services should Congress authorize breaching of the dams. Those services include transportation, recreation, hydropower, and water supply. Washington State is partnering with federal agencies to fund and/or conduct some of the studies.ⁱⁱⁱ

- The [Lower Snake River Dams Transportation Study](#) is being conducted by the Washington State Department of Transportation and their contractors, Jacobs and CPCS, with the Army Corps of Engineers providing some funding through its Planning Assistance to States authority.^{iv} A final report is due to the Washington legislature by the end of 2026.

Washington State’s Joint Transportation Committee has also funded an independent review of the assumptions of the Transportation Study by the Freight Policy Transportation Institute at Washington State University, which is expected to be completed in summer 2025.

ⁱⁱ The NWF Plaintiffs are: the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen’s Associations, the Institute for Fisheries Resources, Sierra Club, Idaho Rivers United, Northwest Sport Fishing Industry Association, NW Energy Coalition, National Wildlife Federation, Columbia Riverkeeper, Idaho Conservation League, and Fly Fishers International.

ⁱⁱⁱ The WA 2023-2025 Operating Budget contains \$500,000 for irrigation study, \$2,000,000 for energy study, \$5,000,000 for transportation study. The 2024-2025 Supplemental Operating Budget contains \$600,000 for recreation study. [2023-25 enacted budgets | Office of Financial Management](#)

^{iv} USACOE Northwestern Division. Nov. 4 2024, “Army planners, Washington State agree to study potential future recreation and transportation services.” [Army planners, Washington State agree to study potential future recreation and transportation services > Northwestern Division > Northwestern Division News Releases](#)

- The [Lower Snake River Recreation Study](#) is being conducted by the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. It will examine potential changes to recreation in the study area should Congress authorize breach of the Lower Snake River Dams. The study includes a public survey.
- The [Pacific Northwest Regional Planning Project \(PREPP\)](#) is a Northwest-wide regional energy study designed to identify infrastructure investments that will be required to meet energy needs in the region through the next 20 years. It will include at least one scenario that examines infrastructure needs in the event that Congress authorizes the breach of the Lower Snake River Dams in conjunction with achieving healthy and abundant salmon runs. The study is funded by the U.S. Department of Energy and the Washington State Department of Commerce and will be conducted by the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, with the input of a range of stakeholders, including representatives of the Six Sovereigns, consumer and investor-owned utilities, independent power producers, consumer protection advocates, and environmental organizations. ODOE subject matter experts will be engaging with the study through its Technical Committee. It is due to be completed by December 2025.
- The [Lower Snake River Water Supply Replacement Study](#) is being conducted by the Bureau of Reclamation and the Washington State Department of Ecology. The study seeks to inventory current water supply and uses near the Lower Snake River Dams and evaluate impacts to water delivery and possible mitigation measures should Congress authorize breach of the dams. The study's final report is due in mid-2025.

Executive Orders

Both Oregon Governor Tina Kotek and Washington Governor Jay Inslee have signed Executive Orders regarding the implementation of the CBRI and RCBA. Governor Kotek's order directs relevant state agencies, including the Oregon Department of Energy, to "take actions necessary within their existing authority, and identify necessary additional authorities they do not presently have, in support of fulfilling Oregon's commitments to the CBRI and the RCBA."

Relevance to Lower Snake River Dams

Only Congress can authorize the breach of federal dams; the Governors' orders only direct state agencies to support the objectives of the CBRI and RCBA within the bounds of state jurisdiction.

Oregon [Executive Order 24-28](#)

Washington [Executive Order 24-06](#)



Columbia Basin Collaborative

The Columbia Basin Collaborative (CBC), established in 2020 with leadership from the states of Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington, is a collaboration with the goal of advancing the quantitative and qualitative goals of the Columbia Basin Partnership Task Force Phase 2 report, [A Vision for Salmon and Steelhead: Goals to Restore Thriving Salmon and Steelhead to the Columbia River Basin](#). The Task Force was convened by NOAA's Marine Fisheries Advisory Committee in 2017, and the Phase 2 report goals were accepted by NOAA's Assistant Administrator in 2020.

The CBC is composed of representatives from the four participating states, Tribal Nations in the region, federal agencies, and other regional stakeholders, and is comprised of a Project Team, Work Groups, and an Integration/Recommendations Group. Based on the results of the Work Groups' efforts, the Integration/Recommendations Group [develops recommendations for actions](#) that would advance the Phase 2 goals. The CBC promotes these recommendations to the appropriate regional decision-makers, who may choose whether and how to implement them.

Relevance to Lower Snake River Dams

While the CBC does have a Hydropower/Blocked Areas Work Group to discuss challenges to native fish related to dams, nothing in the CBC's originating documents mentions dam breach of any kind.

Columbia River Treaty

The Columbia River Treaty (CRT) is a 1961 treaty between the United States and Canada that led to the development of four dams: Duncan, Mica, and Keenleyside dams in British Columbia, Canada, and Libby Dam in Montana. The Treaty laid out the terms under which the benefits of the dams would be shared. Canada receives electricity from downstream Columbia River dams in exchange for providing water storage upstream for flood control and power generation. This right to electricity is referred to as "The Canadian Entitlement." The Treaty has a provision for termination any time after September 2024, provided the terminating party gives at least 10 years notice.

Recognizing the importance of modernizing the CRT, the United States and Canada have been renegotiating the Treaty since 2014 and in July 2024 reached an agreement in principle on major points. Interim measures have been put in place that reflect aspects of the agreement in principle while final treaty amendments are drafted and ratification processes in both countries are completed. These measures include a 37 percent decrease of the Canadian Entitlement as of August 1, 2024; a November 1, 2024 assumption of and payment for 1,120 MW of transmission rights by Canada's Powerex; and 3.6-million-acre-feet of water storage at Arrow Lakes reservoir by Canada for U.S. flood risk management through 2027.^v

^v US State Department. "Interim Measures to Continue Columbia River Treaty Coordination." [Interim Measures to Continue Columbia River Treaty Coordination - United States Department of State](#)

Relevance to Lower Snake River Dams

As this is an international agreement, there is no relevance to the question of a Congressional authorization of the breach of US federal dams.

The U.S. State Department maintains [an engagement page on the CRT](#).

British Columbia also maintains [an engagement page on the CRT](#).

