

Tribes call for removal of 3 Columbia River dams

By Gillian Flaccus
Associated Press

THE DALLES — Two Pacific Northwest tribes on Monday demanded the removal of three major hydroelectric dams on the Columbia River to save migrating salmon and starving orcas and restore fishing sites that were guaranteed to the tribes in a treaty more than 150 years ago.

The Yakama and Lummi nations made the demand of the U.S. government on Indigenous Peoples Day, a designation that's part of a trend to move away from a holiday honoring Christopher Columbus.

The tribes referred to the Bonneville, The Dalles and John Day dams.

For decades, people have debated whether to remove four big dams on the Lower Snake River, a tributary of the Columbia, but breaching the three Columbia dams, which are a much more significant source of power, has never been seriously discussed.

Proposals to merely curtail operations, let alone remove the structures, are controversial, and the prospects of the Columbia dams being demolished any time soon appear nonexistent.

Tribal leaders said at a news conference along the Columbia River that the Treaty of 1855, in which 14 tribes and bands ceded 11.5 million acres to the United States, was based on the inaccurate belief that the U.S. had a right to take the land.

Under the treaty, the Yakama Tribe retained the right to fish at all their traditional sites. But construction



Gillian Flaccus / Associated Press

JoDe Goudy, chairman of the Yakama Nation, speaks with the Columbia River in the background near The Dalles on Monday, where Celilo Falls, an ancient salmon fishing site was destroyed by the construction of The Dalles Dam in the 1950s.

of the massive concrete dams decades later along the lower Columbia River destroyed critical fishing spots and made it impossible for salmon to complete their migration.

After a song of prayer, Yakama Nation Chairman JoDe Goudy spoke Monday at the site of now-vanished Celilo Falls near The Dalles, and said the placid Columbia River behind him looked "like a lake where we once saw a free-flowing river."

"We have a choice and it's one or the other: dams or salmon," he said. "Our ancestors tell us to look as far into the future as we can. Will we be the generation that forgot those who are coming behind us, those yet unborn?"

Celilo Falls was a traditional salmon-fishing site for the Yakama for centuries, but it was swallowed by the river in 1957 after the construction

of The Dalles Dam.

The three dams operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are a critical part of a complex hydroelectric network strung along the Columbia and Snake rivers in Oregon, Washington and Idaho that powers the entire region.

Government officials were unavailable for further comment Monday due to the holiday.

Supporters of dams along the Columbia and Snake rivers note the vast amount of clean energy they produce and their usefulness for irrigation and transportation. For example, they allow farmers to ship about half of U.S. wheat exports by barge instead of by truck or rail. According to the Pacific Northwest Waterways Association, about 40,000 local jobs are dependent on shipping on the

Columbia and Snake rivers.

The Lummi Nation is in northwestern Washington state, far from the Columbia River, but it has also been touched by construction of the dams, said Jeremiah Julius, Lummi Nation chairman.

Chinook salmon are the preferred prey of endangered orcas but just 73 resident orcas remain in the Pacific Northwest — the lowest number in three decades — because of a lack of chinook, as well as toxic contamination and vessel noise. The orcas were hunted for food for generations by the Lummi Nation in the Salish Sea, he said.

"We are in a constant battle ... to leave future generations a lifeway promised our ancestors 164 years ago, he said. "Our people understand that the salmon, like the orca, are the miner's canary for the health of the Salish Sea and for all its children.

"I choose salmon," he added. "I will always choose salmon."

Fish ladders built into the dams allow for the passage of migrating salmon, and migrating fish are hand-counted as they pass through. But the number of salmon making the arduous journey to the Pacific Ocean and back to their natal streams has declined steeply in recent decades.

The Columbia River Basin once produced between 10 million and 16 million salmon a year. Now there are about 1 million a year.

The Bonneville Dam was constructed in the mid-1930s and generates enough electricity to power about 900,000 homes — roughly the size of Portland. The Dalles Dam followed in the 1950s and John Day Dam was completed in 1972.

Environmental groups applauded the tribes' demand and said efforts to save salmon without removing the dams aren't working because without the free flow of the Columbia, the entire river ecosystem is out of balance.

PARTS OF OREGON, IDAHO, NEVADA

BLM unveils plan to build fuel breaks

By Keith Ridler
Associated Press

BOISE — One option in a plan to battle devastating wildfires in southwestern Idaho, southeastern Oregon and northern Nevada creates 1,500 miles of fuel breaks up to 400 feet wide along existing roads.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management on Friday released a draft environmental impact statement for the Tri-State Fuel Breaks Project and is taking public comments through November.

The agency said creating fuel breaks by clearing vegetation will help firefighters stop wildfires and protect key habitat for sage grouse and other wildlife on land also used by cattle ranchers and outdoor enthusiasts.

The area contains one of the largest strongholds for greater sage grouse in the northern Great Basin but faces wildfire threats from invasive annual grasses, notably fire-prone cheatgrass. Federal officials in 2015 declined to list sage grouse as needing protection under the Endangered Species Act.

But giant wildfires have impacted the bird's habitat. In the last decade, the area has seen repeated giant rangeland wildfires up to 870 square miles. The agency said that at least five of the wildfires, mainly fueled by cheatgrass, burned more than 150 square miles in the first 24 hours.

Cheatgrass is an annual that quickly returns, while native, slow-growing sagebrush can take decades to recover.

"The shrub-steppe landscapes within this area represent one of the most imperiled ecosystems in the United States," the bureau said.

Scott Lake of Western Watersheds Project, an environmental group, said the fuel breaks would ultimately harm the region by opening areas to cheatgrass and other invasive plants. He also said the fuel breaks would fragment habitat, isolating wildlife populations afraid to cross open ground created by fuel breaks.

The bureau doesn't "manage these fuel breaks to the extent that's needed to prevent invasive species from taking root," Lake said.

Sage grouse are ground-dwelling, chicken-sized birds found in 11 Western states, where between 200,000 to 500,000 remain, down from a peak population of about 16 million. They rely on sagebrush to survive.

The Idaho Department of Fish and Game said earlier this year that sage grouse numbers in the state have dropped more than 50% since 2015. In Oregon, bird numbers this year reached their lowest level — 14,000 — since reliable estimates have been recorded beginning in 1996, according to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Oregon might allow customers to bring reusable containers to stores, restaurants

SALEM (AP) — Oregon may soon allow customers to bring their own reusable food containers to grocery stores and restaurants in an effort to curb plastic waste.

The Statesman Journal reports that's not currently allowed under U.S. Food and Drug Administration rules, which Oregon has adopted, because of the potential for cross-contamination with pathogens or allergens.

But pressure to change state regulations has been mounting, state officials said, following China's decision in January 2018 to stop allowing many items from the U.S. to be imported for recycling.

Since then, Oregonians have thrown away more than 16,000 tons of previously recyclable items, much of them single-use plastics like take-out containers.

"People are looking for ways to reduce the waste stream," said Isaak Stapleton, Food Safety Program director for the Oregon Department of Agriculture.

Calls for a rule change intensified after the state cracked down on a program at First Alternative Co-op in Corvallis, which had for years been washing containers returned by customers and offering them for reuse. Its customers submitted a petition to state regulators.

Oregon is starting with a look at rules for grocery stores, which ODA licenses and inspects.

Rule changes for restaurants likely will soon

follow, said Dave Martin, Foodborne Illness Prevention Program coordinator at the Oregon Health Authority. OHA licenses and inspects restaurants, through county health departments.

Not all retailers are on board, though.

At an ODA-led meeting in August, grocery chain representatives worried about cross-contamination, and pointed out additional concerns.

Among them: The possibility of theft if the containers aren't clear; consumers using containers not meant to be used multiple times; and problems getting an accurate tare weight, or the weight of the container before it's filled.

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