



Current Reflections

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Locks Get a Facelift for the Future

Navigation locks at the eight federal dams on the Columbia and Snake rivers are re-opening for business. That's good news not just for the Northwest's economy but globally, as well. The locks have been closed since December 10th. Pacific Northwest Waterways Association (PNWA), a long-time RiverPartners member, had a hands-on role in preparing for the period in which the world was without this busy transportation corridor.

And how is that?

The Columbia/Snake River System is the #1 gateway for U.S. wheat exports, U.S. barley exports, West Coast wood exports, and West Coast bulk mineral exports, and it holds the #2 spot as the gateway for West Coast auto imports. These and other goods are important not just to the Northwest, but they travel from states much farther east to be transported on the river system. For example, 40 million tons of cargo valued at \$17 billion each year travel in a deep water channel from Astoria to Portland and Vancouver. The 359-mile inland system that moves goods from Vancouver to Lewiston and vice-versa supports 10 million tons of cargo annually valued at \$2 billion.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps), which operates and maintains the dams and locks, and PNWA have worked together for years on long-term maintenance strategies, with a high priority on causing the smallest possible impact to river users. When funds from the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) became available, the advance planning paid off.

The Corps' Portland and Walla Walla districts were able to show they had "shovel-ready projects" in the form of lock repair and replacement. A combination of ARRA funds and Corps budgeted funds were used to replace the downstream mitre gate at The Dalles and the downstream lift gates at John Day and Lower Monumental dams

While the injection of funds meant the Columbia/Snake River System would get much needed repairs, it also meant putting the system out of commission for a considerable length of time. That's where PNWA stepped in to get stakeholders involved and assure they were accommodated during an outage of this magnitude.



Navigation lock gate sections. Corps photo

PNWA brought the Corps together with river users to work on a detailed schedule for the outage, and once that was determined, PNWA began communicating with grain producers, ports, and others to ensure detailed information was available for them and their clients. It was imperative that buyers overseas knew about the outage so they could structure their sourcing of U.S. grain and other products accordingly.

The Corps and PNWA provided stakeholders with more than 18 months advance notice of the closure. Grain producers and exporters were able to ship the bulk of their product by barge, the most efficient and cost-effective mode of transportation for them, prior to the outage. Some producers chose to shift product to truck or rail and some stored their product for shipping after the locks reopen.

Tidewater Barge Lines was able to stage fuel barges in the Tri-Cities area to ensure adequate fuel reserves for the winter and as a hedge against potential fuel price hikes. As of early March, fuel prices had not inflated due to the closure. With the open dialogue and planning that occurred, overall impact to stakeholders has been relatively low. The work was carried out without any impacts on fish or hydropower production.

The infrastructure investments, maintenance, and repairs made during the closure have long-term benefits for the Northwest and those who depend on goods that travel by river.

The Columbia/Snake River System is poised for tremendous growth in commercial use over the next 15 years. With this extensive lock maintenance accomplished, it will remain a reliable asset to handle the expected upsurge in waterborne commerce.

For more information on this closure, log onto [PNWA's website](#), or visit the [U. S. Army Corps of Engineers](#).



Glenn Vanselow is Executive Director of Pacific Northwest Waterways Association, a member of [Northwest RiverPartners](#), an alliance of farmers, utilities, ports and businesses that promote the economic and environmental benefits of the Columbia and Snake Rivers and salmon recovery policies based on sound science.