

Biden administration acknowledges harms of Columbia River dams on Indigenous people

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The hydropower dams on the Columbia River flooded villages, disrupted economies and ways of life and continue to harm people indigenous to the Pacific Northwest, according to a first-of-its-kind federal report

released Tuesday.

The report by the Department of Interior was produced as part of a major agreement last year between tribes and the United States, in which the federal government promised \$1 billion to restore [wild salmon](#), produce clean energy and more—but ultimately stopped short of [dam removal](#), an intensely controversial subject.

The report provides a summary of the historic, ongoing and cumulative harm to eight Columbia Basin tribes caused by 11 dams built in the Columbia and Snake rivers. It marks the first time the federal government has detailed these harms.

From the displacement of people to the silencing of rushing flows and the decline of salmon, the report evaluates how the Columbia River Basin, and the Indigenous people intrinsically tied to it, was dramatically altered in less than a century after the construction of dams. The report calls for federal agencies to recognize tribes' expertise in restoring salmon runs, and to take impactful, immediate next steps.

"To have the recognition of not just historical traumas but also present has been personally impactful," said Yakama Nation Councilmember Jeremy Takala in an interview. "I live over here in Goldendale, like lots of tribal folks living along the river and still dealing with the impacts. ... There are still unfulfilled obligations."

"The big river is what keeps our people here, because of the ties and connection," Takala added.

Today, 13 runs of Columbia Basin salmon and steelhead are listed for protection under the Endangered Species Act. The causes of salmon decline are numerous and include water withdrawals for irrigation, habitat lost to farming and development, overfishing by non-Native

settlers, poor hatchery practices, climate change and fish killed by the dams.

Warming and development continue to heighten the risk of salmon extinction, especially in the impounded Snake, which has seen toxic algae blooms and water temperatures exceeding the lethal threshold for salmon.

The Columbia Basin agreement was announced in December between the U.S. government, the states of Washington and Oregon, the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon, the Nez Perce Tribe—and a coalition of conservation, fishing and renewable energy groups represented by Earthjustice.

It stems from years of mediated negotiations in a decadeslong court battle over dam operations. Tribal nations helped draw up a road map for the future of the region's energy and salmon. Under the agreement, approved by a federal judge this year, tribes will help restore wild fish and lead in the construction of at least 1 to 3 gigawatts of clean-energy production.

A stay of litigation is in place for up to five years and could continue for as long as 10.

The 70-page report comes alongside the creation of a new Columbia River Task Force that will oversee the efforts to fulfill the Biden administration's commitments to restore native fish populations and expand tribally sponsored clean energy.

Nik Blosser, former chief of staff for Oregon Gov. Kate Brown and a former vice president at Portland General Electric, will serve as the task

force's first executive director and members will include representatives from [federal agencies](#).

"We are able to identify that there are issues surrounding the Columbia River system of operations and its devastating impacts on the environment, the salmon and what depends on them," Nez Perce Chairman Shannon Wheeler said in an interview.

"There has to be that common understanding so we can look forward with clarity. Reflecting on the past is what needs to happen in order to reaffirm our commitments to one another through the treaty."

For thousands of years, Indigenous people lived in harmony with a flourishing Columbia River ecosystem. Some salmon would grow big enough to feed the orcas, others would come back and feed the people, provide nutrients for the soil, trees, critters and spawn future generations.

Tribes honor these foods at ceremonial feasts. According to Umatilla tradition, the foods are served "in the order in which these foods promised to care for the Indian people."

For many tribes, salmon is of paramount importance, the report states.

Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation consider salmon "sacred relatives." The Nez Perce Tribe describes this relationship as creating a covenant between the Nez Perce people and the salmon. Yakama Nation has described salmon as the Creator's second gift to the people, and in return for the gift the people are to care for the waters that sustain the salmon.

One report estimates that treaty tribes harvested 2.5 million to 5.6 million pounds of salmon annually prior to settlers' arrival.

In signing treaties with the United States in the mid-1800s, the Lower Columbia tribes reserved the right to fish in perpetuity at their usual and accustomed places, in exchange for ceding millions of acres to the federal government.

As the Columbia and Snake rivers were transformed from free flowing to a series of pools serving other purposes, the report details how the annual returns of salmon to the basin dwindled.

The report is centered on 11 dams: the four lower Columbia dams—Bonneville, The Dalles, John Day and McNary; the two upper Columbia dams—Chief Joseph and Grand Coulee; the four lower Snake dams—Ice Harbor, Lower Monumental, Little Goose, and Lower Granite; and Dworshak dam, located on the North Fork Clearwater River just upstream of a tributary to the lower Snake River.

Salmon migrated hundreds of miles to the Shoshone-Paiute people of the Duck Valley Reservation in the southernmost tip of the basin before the Owyhee Dam cut off their historic habitat. The salmon once ran, in the millions, up the Snake and its tributaries.

Wild Snake River salmon runs are 0.1–2% of the abundance at the time the United States entered into the 1855 treaties with tribes.

"This story was replicated throughout numerous tributaries to the Columbia River," the report states.

June Hogs, the big Chinook that many recall lumbering up and the Columbia after cruising the northeastern Pacific, are now virtually nonexistent. Of 16 once-existing salmonid stocks, four have been extirpated—Mid-Columbia River coho, Mid-Columbia River sockeye, Upper Columbia River coho and Snake River coho.

The report explained how early mitigation efforts for the impacts of dams that severed salmon and steelhead from their historic habitat were centered around raising the fish in hatcheries. Despite the Bonneville Power Administration, a federal agency that markets electricity from the dams, spending billions of dollars in ratepayer funds on salmon in the basin, not a single run has recovered.

"The failure to meet abundance goals contributes to salmon harvest deficits. At no point since the beginning of Columbia River Basin development have Tribal fishers been able to harvest more than a fraction of their historic share of salmon returns," the report continues.

Dams, the report describes, silenced sites that for thousands of years were "filled with the noise of rushing water and people communing, praying, fishing, trading, and celebrating."

Celilo Falls was "a place of wonder. A symphony of nature, the river was in constant motion," the report stated, quoting from book "The Si'lailo Way." "Native men climbed onto the wood scaffolds and reached into the river with long poles that had nets on the ends. Using these dip nets, they caught migrating salmon."

The reservoir behind Grand Coulee Dam, known today as Lake Roosevelt, reaches 151 miles upstream, inundating well over 100 miles of salmon habitat on the mainstem, and dozens more on the Spokane, Kettle and San Poil rivers, and many small tributaries, along with Kettle Falls itself.

The inundation of Kettle Falls spurred the Ceremony of Tears, a gathering of at least 1,000 people, with representatives of multiple tribes, to mourn the impending loss of the falls in 1940. The construction of Grand Coulee also forced the relocation of many tribal homes and burial sites as it flooded portions of the Colville and Spokane

reservations—lands that those tribes just decades before had reserved from their vast ancestral territories.

"And yet, Celilo and Kettle Falls are only the largest and busiest fishing sites flooded by the federal dams," the report states, acknowledging further harm.

"The flourishing of Basin Tribes is inextricably linked to the health of the Columbia River and its tributaries. The holistic nature of the impacts on the Tribes documented in this report makes clear that the government must aim for more than compliance with the ESA and other environmental statutes," the report states. "The government should support actions that achieve healthy and abundant populations of salmon, other fish, and wildlife throughout the Basin."

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, in a comprehensive report on the river released in September 2022, stated that dam removal on the Lower Snake will be necessary along with other actions to boost salmon abundance.

"The Yakama Nation has always spoke for the water, fish, and cultural resources that cannot speak-up for themselves. I am hopeful that through this [report](#), federal entities will listen to Yakama People," said Gerald Lewis, Yakama Tribal Council chairman, in a statement.

"We will know that we have been heard when the hydro-system agencies start prioritizing their commitments to salmon recovery and our tribal fishers."

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