

## Yakama, Lummi tribal leaders call for removal of three lower Columbia River dams

By Linda V. Mapes | Oct. 14, 2019



JoDe Goudy, chairman of the Yakama Nation, calls on Monday for the removal of three dams on the lower Columbia River. “Dams or salmon,” he said in an emotional plea at the Celilo Village park near The Dalles Dam. (Steve Ringman / The Seattle Times)



Celilo Falls for some 11,000 years was one of the most important salmon fisheries in the world and a hub of tribal cultural and economic exchange. That all ended with construction of The Dalles Dam in 1957. (Wayne Buchanan / U.S Army Corps of Engineers)



The Bonneville Dam on the lower Columbia River. (Steve Ringman / The Seattle Times, 2018)



“This river has been put to sleep,” said Olsen Meanus, a traditional chief on the Mid-Columbia. (Steve Ringman / The Seattle Times)

CELILO VILLAGE, Wasco County, Ore. — The Yakama and Lummi nations called Monday for taking down the Bonneville, The Dalles and John Day hydroelectric dams on the Columbia River to restore salmon runs once the mightiest in the world.

The three big energy producers churn out enough electricity to power more than 2 million Pacific Northwest homes annually and also provide an important inland navigation route for commercial goods.

The tribes’ call for main-stem dam removal intensifies a long-running debate over the teardown of dams in the Columbia River Basin. This year in particular feels desperate for tribes and fishermen

and advocates of endangered southern resident orcas, which rely on chinook salmon from the river. Some fish runs are at 13 percent of their 10-year averages.

Jay Julius, chairman of the Lummi Nation, and JoDe Goudy, chairman of the Yakama Nation, gathered — on Indigenous Peoples Day — at Celilo Village, all that is left of the fishing and cultural center at Celilo Falls, the most productive salmon fishery in the world for some 11,000 years. The falls were [drowned beneath the reservoir of The Dalles Dam in 1957](#).

## Tribes call for dam removal

The Yakama and Lummi nations called on Monday for the removal of three main-stem Columbia River dams to help recover salmon and the orcas that rely on them.



Goudy said Columbus Day, a federal holiday also on Monday, celebrates the invasion of the lands and waters of indigenous people under the colonial doctrine of discovery, under which Christian Europeans seized native lands.

The lower Columbia River dams inundated many usual and accustomed fishing sites of the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, and led to the decline of salmon, lamprey and other traditional foods.

“The tribe never consented to the construction of the lower Columbia River dams,” said Goudy, wearing an eagle feather headdress and white buckskins. “On behalf of the Yakama Nation and those things that cannot speak for themselves, I call on the United States to reject the doctrine of Christian discovery and immediately remove the Bonneville Dam, Dalles Dam and John Day Dam.”

Julius said the Lummi Nation stands with the Yakama Nation in calling for the removal of the dams. Tribes throughout the region are in a constant battle to defend their way of life, Julius said.

“Whether defeating coal ports, opposing increased vessel traffic on the Salish Sea, repairing culverts or removing invasive Atlantic salmon, to leave to future generations a lifeway promised to

our ancestors 164 years ago,” he said, [referring to the treaty](#) the Lummi Nation signed with the U.S. government in 1855 ceding much of their lands while reserving forever their rights to fish, hunt and gather in their traditional places.

In addition to power generation, the dams are part of a system of locks that provide inland navigation all the way to Lewiston, Idaho. Some \$2 billion in commercial cargo travels the Columbia and Snake river systems each year, according to U.S. Army Corps of Engineers statistics reported by The Associated Press. In 2017, that cargo included 53 percent of U.S. wheat exports.

Endangered southern resident orcas prey on Columbia and Snake River fish, as well as fish in Puget Sound, the Fraser River in British Columbia and even California’s Sacramento River. The loss of Columbia and Snake fish is probably the single biggest change in the amount of food available to them, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s recovery plan for the whales.

[There are only 73 southern resident orcas left.](#) Lack of available, adequate, quality food is one of three main threats to their survival, in addition to pollution and noise. Multiple salmon runs in the Columbia and Snake also are battling extinction, in part because of the dams.

“It’s one or the other,” Goudy said. “Dams, or salmon.”



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For Julius, who said he is descended from 100 generations of fishermen, it’s no contest. “For the record,” he said, “I choose salmon.”

Alteration of the river and Salish Sea has come so quickly that his own grandparents remembered the time before non-Indian settlement, Julius said. And yet the destruction of the natural world has been extensive: The river was pooled behind him at the podium, so calm it looked like a lake. Trains rumbled up and down both sides of the Columbia, drowning out the speakers at times, especially elders, talking softly in their native language.

The call for main-stem dam removal adds a new drumbeat for change on the river, where power markets already are shaking up the Bonneville Power Administration, which markets electricity from the dams.

A surge of wind and solar energy on the grid — along with power generation from natural gas — have upended BPA's historic position as the low-cost provider in the region.

BPA must foot the bill for the costs of maintaining an aging hydroelectric system and for bankrolling salmon restoration efforts. The administration is also scrambling to remain competitive when long-term contracts with public utilities come up in 2028.

Yet as coal plants increasingly are phased out of the Western power grid, hydropower will become an increasingly important asset as the regional grid operators struggle to reduce the risk of brownouts or blackouts during periods of peak demand that unfold during days when solar and wind power may be at a low ebb.

The lower Columbia dams have deep regional support that would likely make any effort to remove them an even tougher battle than the yearslong campaign by salmon advocates to remove the Lower Snake River dams.

"We have great respect for the Yakama and Lummi nations and for Indigenous Peoples Day, but we believe that the lower Columbia River dams are a critical carbon free resource in our fight against the climate crisis that threatens the health and well-being of the entire Northwest," said a statement released by [Northwest RiverPartners](#), which has a membership that includes ports, businesses and consumer-owned utilities.

The Portland-based BPA also released a statement responding to the tribes' Monday announcement.

"We remain focused on continuing our work with our many partners throughout the region to address the environmental, economic and cultural issues within the Columbia River Basin," said the statement. BPA officials declined further comment.

In Washington, Gov. Jay Inslee's spokeswoman Tara Lee said that the governor "supports rebuilding fish runs to tribal communities ... including improving fish passage, and exploring ways to reintroduce salmon in areas blocked by dams such as the upper Columbia."

When asked to clarify that statement, Lee said Inslee "previously said he is open to exploring options around the dams."

The generating units at The Dalles, John Day and Bonneville are part of a Columbia River Basin hydroelectric system of 31 dams that produces electricity for the Northwest and exports it to other Western states. The three dams have a combined capacity of more than 5,000 megawatts, and on average generate more than 2,500 megawatts of power, according to the Northwest Power and Conservation Council.

The John Day Dam is the biggest of the three, with its generating capacity from Columbia River waters surpassed only by McNary, Chief Joseph and the largest of the basin dams — Grand Coulee.

John Day's total cost of generating power was identified as the lowest of any of the hydroelectric dams in the basin network. It also is one of five dams that is considered "particularly critical" to the network due to the "significant financial impact of a generating unit outage," at the facility, according to a June 2016 joint federal review of the Columbia basin hydroelectric system.

Federal agencies have since 1992 been on the defensive against calls for a major overhaul on the river.

Johnny Jackson, an 88-year-old Yakama elder, said he remember fishing the river at Celilo Falls.

"It was fast running water," Jackson said. "I fished there. It was good."

*Seattle Times reporter Hal Bernton contributed to this story from Portland.*

*Correction: A previous version of this story misspelled the name of Jay Julius, Lummi Nation chairman.*