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House Passes WRDA; federal funding for mussel defense slow to reach states

The U.S. House of Representatives approved the Water Resources Development Act of 2016 (WRDA) Wednesday, September 28, a \$5 billion measure that authorizes spending on the nation's water infrastructure. The bill authorizes up to \$20 million to be administered by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to match state spending for watercraft inspection stations protecting the Columbia River Basin, including those in Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana, from aquatic invasive species. The U.S. Senate passed a version of WRDA on Sept. 15.

An infestation of quagga or zebra mussels would rapidly foul and damage the operations of hydropower, irrigation, fish hatcheries and municipal water facilities vital to our region's economy. These filter-feeders also disrupt pre-existing food webs and degrade the habitats of native fish and shellfish.

A Pacific NorthWest Economic Region impact assessment estimated the cost of a mussel infestation in Western Canada and the Pacific Northwest U.S. to be \$500 million annually. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that if zebra and quagga mussels invade the Columbia River, they could cost hydroelectric facilities alone up to \$300 million a year, not including costs associated with environmental damages or increased operating expenses to hatcheries and water diversions.

In December of 2015, Congress appropriated \$4 million within the federal budget to match state spending in Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana on watercraft inspection stations. Watercraft inspection stations provide the most effective means to stop invasive mussels before they reach Northwest waterways. However, states have not yet received any federal money for contracts, nor guidelines for implementation, from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

An amendment proposed by PNWER and our partners and successfully championed by U.S. Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler of Washington effectively doubles the federal funding available to states by allowing funds to go to stations that protect the Columbia River Basin, but are located outside of it. The amendment also allows federal funds to help establish new stations as well as support existing ones.

"Prevention is the first line of defense, and the cheapest tool to use against invasive species. Watercraft inspection stations are particularly crucial in successful monitoring and detection. These stations intercept thousands of boats from all over the country to inspect and decontaminate," Herrera Beutler said.

“This is why Congress authorized funds under the 2014 WRDA to support watercraft inspection stations that protect the Columbia River Basin from mussel invasion. Unfortunately, these funds have yet to actually reach the stations due to ambiguity in the law.”

Herrera Beutler said an infestation of freshwater mussels in the Columbia River Basin would disrupt the production of clean, renewable hydropower, leading to utility rate hikes for communities along the river.

"Communities would also suffer severe damages to fisheries and boats putting all users and recreators of the Columbia and Snake River systems at risk," Herrera Beutler added.

Coordinating a perimeter defense of the Pacific Northwest has been a major priority of the Pacific NorthWest Economic Region and our partners, including the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission and the Northwest Power and Conservation Council. Continued federal funding is necessary to adequately protect our region's water resources and infrastructure.

"This is a major economic and environmental issue in the region. After years working with state and federal legislators, state agencies and non-profit partners, the states still have no support to prevent a \$500 million tragedy in the Pacific Northwest," said PNWER Executive Director Matt Morrison.

The Pacific Northwest is the last remaining region in the country that does not have established populations of quagga and zebra mussels. The mussels multiply quickly and are easily transported across jurisdictions on boat hulls and in ballast tanks. Once the mussels establish themselves in a waterway, there is no proven method of eradicating them.

Learn more about PNWER's Invasive Species Working Group at www.pnwer.org/invasive-species. Read the full report: [Advancing a Regional Defense Against Dreissenids in the Pacific Northwest](#).