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U.S. Senate passes improved WRDA language for invasive species defense

The U.S. Senate passed the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) on Saturday, Dec. 10, clarifying language within the 2014 Water Resources Reform and Development Act on watercraft inspection stations. Once signed by the president, the new bill will help Washington, Oregon and Idaho defend against a costly infestation of invasive freshwater mussels and assist Montana's containment efforts.

The Pacific NorthWest Economic Region (PNWER) urged Pacific Northwest congressional delegations to include language in the bill that now allows the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to establish, operate or maintain new or existing watercraft inspection stations, not only within the Columbia River Basin, but at locations which will be most effective at preventing an infestation of the basin. This new language nearly doubles the amount of federal funds available to the states and expands the reach of federal aid to stations located outside the Columbia River Basin, on highways coming into the region.

The bill also adds a new requirement for the Army Corps to assist with rapid response and early detection efforts. This requirement is important considering mussel larvae have recently been found in Montana's Tiber Reservoir, the first time invasive mussels have been confirmed in a Pacific Northwest waterway. Additional suspect samples have been found at Canyon Ferry reservoir, an upper reservoir of the Missouri River, and the Milk Rivers in Montana.

"This bill's new wording means Montana may be able to access millions more in federal aid to control the mussels found in the Missouri River watershed. Montana is doing all it can to contain these mussels and prevent them from reaching the Columbia River watershed," said Rep. Mike Cuffe of Montana.

PNWER and its partners have coordinated mussel prevention efforts and helped secure funding for the Pacific Northwest states and Western Canada for the past six years. In 2015, PNWER and the Pacific States Marine Fisheries produced a Regional Framework for Perimeter Defense, which outlined the best ways that states, provinces and federal border agents could prevent the spread of mussels.

Both Senate and House Appropriations Committees have included additional funding for this section in the 2017 funding package, which has yet to be passed by Congress. It is likely that a Continuing Resolution will prolong the funding bill until April, but \$3.75 million is available in the current budget and is waiting on the Army Corps to finalize contracting with the states.

Although these federal funds were appropriated in the 2016 budget through the Water Resources Development Act to match state spending in Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington on watercraft inspection stations, states have not yet received any federal money for contracts from the Army Corps.

Matt Morrison, executive director of PNWER, applauded Congress for including this new language in the 2016 WRDA Bill.

"This is a vital step to preventing an ecological and economic crisis that could affect all our waterways for decades to come," Morrison said. "The new bill may double resources for Montana to effectively build a firewall between the Missouri and Columbia River drainage in central Montana. Once these mussels are in the Columbia, they will just float downstream and infect British Columbia, Washington, Idaho, and Oregon, and there is no known way to prevent this."

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, as well as severely impact recreation. These filter-feeders also disrupt pre-existing food webs and degrade the habitats of native fish and shellfish.

A PNWER 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.