

Legislators:

I support the approval of Senate Bill 131 and the implementation of the Willamette Falls Navigation Canal and Locks Task Force.

Here's why: for centuries the rivers of Oregon have been major conduits for commerce and they will serve this role into the future. The rivers are an energy efficient and indeed sometimes the only way to move things (think Spruce Goose). Now the Willamette also serves commercial and recreational users through excursions, tours and cruises. The locks provide the only means of connecting the upper and lower reaches of the river. There isn't even a practical portage around the falls.

Do nothing isn't an option either. Eventually major work will be required on the locks even if they are never operated. The upper gates are the only barrier to the river's diversion into the locks channel, drawing the upper river down several feet. This would affect river levels way upstream, seriously impact the PGE Hydro plant at the falls, and indeed divert much of the river through the locks channel rather than over the falls. That would be completely unacceptable.

The obstacles aren't trivial. The US Army Corps of Engineers is a highly capable operator of the locks, but their prioritization doesn't value the kinds of traffic the locks will increasingly serve. There are precedents for cofunding operations like the Willamette Falls locks, but they rely on Corps of Engineers cooperation, which may be unreliable. Ownership transfer have been done, most notably the Fox River system in Wisconsin, but that took years and federal legislative support.

For all of these reasons it's important to have the interests of Oregon and Oregonians represented, in order to seek viable long-term solutions to the operation of the locks. This task force represents the best chance to advance that goal, and for these reasons I support approval of Senate Bill 131 and the implementation of the task force.

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