New Perspectives
Freight Transportation on the Lower Snake River
By Linwood Laughy
Pacific Northwesterners have contentiously debated the issue of the four lower Snake River dams since before their construction in the 1960s and 70s.
The looming extinction of Southern Resident Killer Whales and collapsing Snake River salmon and steelhead runs have recently brought this simmering issue to a boil.
Three major elements define the debate:

- Freight transportation
- Hydropower
- Snake River ESA-listed threatened and endangered salmon and steelhead.

This presentation focuses on freight transportation.
Beginning in 2000, freight volume transported on the Lower Snake River has declined dramatically as demonstrated in the following four graphs.
In 2000, the Port of Lewiston shipped 17,590 TEUs of containerized freight.

In 2017, container on barge shipping hit zero.

This decline began long before the Port of Portland closed its container operations in 2015.

The probability of container shipping returning to the Lower Snake River is near zero.

*TEU refers to a twenty-foot equivalent unit. Most containers are 40 ft. long, or 2 TEUs. The Port of Lewiston was the only container shipper on the lower Snake River.
20 Years of Freight Decline*

*Freight locked through Ice Harbor Dam provides the most accurate measure of freight volume on the Lower Snake River Project (the 4 dams and their respective reservoirs). Freight shipped to the Port of Pasco, notably petroleum, travels approximately two miles on the Snake River on the pool behind McNary Dam.

- Total freight volume over the past four years averages 2.64 million tons, a decline of over 40% since 2000.

- The LSR no longer transports paper, pulp, petroleum, pulse (lentils, peas and soy beans), logs or lumber.

- Grain accounts for over 90% of all freight shipped on the Lower Snake River (green line).

- Grain shipping has experienced a similar rate of decline as more grain growers shift to rail.
Number of Loaded Barges through Lower Granite Lock (1993-2017)

- All freight traffic to and from the Ports of Lewiston ID, Clarkston WA, and the Port of Wilma (Whitman County, WA) passes through the lock at Lower Granite Dam.

- In 1994, 1,233 loaded barges locked through Lower Granite.

- The number of loaded barges in 2017 was 314, a decline of 75%!

- The number of loaded barges through Lower Granite has declined from an average of 3.4 barges per day to less than 1 barge per day.
The Corps of Engineers classifies rivers by the number of ton-miles of freight a river carries each year. A ton-mile is defined as one ton of freight traveling one mile.

- **High use** rivers transport 3+ billion ton-miles annually
- **Moderate use** rivers transport 1-3 billion ton-miles
- **Low use** rivers transport less than one billion ton-miles

The Snake River transports the lowest volume of freight among 14 waterways in the Inland Waterways System.

In the years 2014-2016, the annual average freight volume on the Lower Snake River totaled 0.28 billion ton-miles.

If the volume of freight on the lower Snake River tripled, the river would still be classified as a low use river.
Region 2: The Poorest Economy in Idaho

Lewiston is the principal city in Region 2, north-central Idaho, represented by the bottom dark orange line. **Lewiston is Idaho’s only port.**

- Dam supporters promised waterborne freight transport would bring economic prosperity to north central Idaho.
- From 1996-2016 the State of Idaho experienced job growth of 39.7%.
  - Region 2 job growth was 6.6%.
- During those same years Idaho’s labor force grew 32.1%.
  - Region 2 experienced a 3.4% rate of growth in its labor force.
- The number of private sector employers in Idaho increased by 49.3%.
  - Region 2 this number was 0.1%.
Freight volume continues to decline. Taxpayer costs continue to rise.

Estimated Tax Payer Costs:

• $10+ Million annually for maintenance and operations.

• $2 Million annually for Clearwater and Snake sediment management ($30+ million since 2004).

• $5+ Million annually for navigation’s share of fish and wildlife costs.

• $3+ Million annually for costs of major lock and dam rehabilitation work during recurring 14 week shutdowns.
The LSR navigation channel is paved with taxpayer dollars.

- Economic analysis pegs the annual cost for LSR freight transportation at a conservative estimate of $18 Million.*

- The total freight volume on the LSR over the past few years averages 2.64 million tons; a barge carries 3,500 tons.

- On top of each barge of grain on the Lower Snake River sits a taxpayer subsidy of at least $24,000!

* Lower Snake River Navigation Study, Rocky Mountain Econometrics September, 2015
Sources & Comments

**Slide 1**: Granite Point on the Snake River before Lower Granite Dam was constructed, Kyle Laughlin Collection, Spokesman Review

**Slide 2**: Spokesman Review Map

**Slide 3**: Betsey Thoennes (salmon and orca)

**Slide 4**: Port of Lewiston (barge), Betsey Thoennes (salmon), U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (dam)

**Slide 5**: Port of Lewiston

**Slide 6**: Port of Lewiston Shipping Reports

**Slide 7**: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Waterborne Commerce of the United States

  Graph: by Rocky Mountain Econometrics

**Slide 8**: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Navigation Data Center Lock Performance

**Slide 9**: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Waterborne Commerce of the United States

**Slide 10**: Idaho Department of Labor, Regional Information

  Note: covered jobs numbers in Region II for 2017 show further decline over the past 10 years, with 2007 employment at 42,645, slipping to 41,858 in 2017.

**Slide 10**: Waterborne Commerce of the U.S.

**Slide 11**: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

**Slide 12**: Inland 360, Nan Vance photographer