

March 9, 2022

The Honorable Peter DeFazio
U.S. House of Representatives
Chair, Committee on Transportation and
Infrastructure
1610 Longworth
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Sam Graves
U.S. House of Representatives
Ranking Member, Committee on
Transportation and Infrastructure,
2333 Rayburn
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Grace Napolitano
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Transportation and
Infrastructure, Chair, Subcommittee on
Water Resources and Environment
1610 Longworth
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable David Rouzer
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Transportation and
Infrastructure, Ranking Member,
Subcommittee on Water Resources and
Environment
2333 Rayburn
Washington, DC 20515

Re: 2022 WRDA Request- National Low-Head Dam Inventory and Financial Assistance Program

Dear Chair DeFazio, Ranking Member Graves, Subcommittee Chair Napolitano and Subcommittee Ranking Member Rouzer,

The undersigned organizations write in support of a national low-head dam inventory and financial assistance program as part of your 2022 Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) legislation. While there is no reliable nation-wide inventory of how many low-head dams exist in the United States, several state and organization run inventories indicate that these structures are ubiquitous in nature. Low-head dams affect fish and wildlife habitat by disrupting connectivity and water quality, and in addition, negatively affect recreation and public safety. To address these impacts, we propose a nationwide inventory of low-head dams to enhance the US Army Corps of Engineers' (USACE) existing National Inventory of Dams (NID) database as well as a technical assistance program to address the highest risk structures.

Over the past two centuries, tens of thousands of low-head dams were constructed across rivers and streams to provide services such as diverting water for irrigation, municipal, or industrial water uses. Others were built to prevent erosion of embankments or to control flooding impacts. Many of these low-head dams no longer serve their original beneficial purpose and remain only as hazards to life and public safety and compromised fish and wildlife habitat. Structural failures of low-head dams present a significant risk from flooding and release of trapped sediment.

Low-head dams can be difficult to detect by upstream water recreators, including drift boaters, kayakers, rafters, and anglers¹ and there is no coordinated federal response to addressing low-head dam concerns. Low-head dams are generally not captured in the NID database because they do not meet statutory height requirements, do not impound water, or would not cause life or property loss upon failure. A national inventory would provide public information resources regarding low-head dam hazards, generate data that could be used to inform state mapping of low-head dams, and provide information on available funding and technical resources to remove and rehabilitate these structures. We propose authorizing the USACE to work with state and local partners to enhance its NID Database and maintain a nationwide inventory of public and privately owned low-head dams.

Building off a Nationwide Low-Head Dam Inventory, we propose a Low-Head Dam Assistance Program (“Assistance Program”), to be administered by USACE, and authorization of funds to implement the Assistance Program. The rehabilitation or removal of low-head dam structures is gaining attention as a strategy to reduce public safety concern, address environmental impacts, and promote economic development through river-based recreation. Where modification or removal of a structure is not immediately possible, technical assistance to provide effective signage and portage routes for boaters and fish passage where appropriate is important.

Addressing the impacts of low-head dams throughout the nation remains a top priority of our organizations. These proposals would greatly enhance the nation’s ability to identify and address the structures that pose the highest risk and impact to people and ecosystems. Thank you in advance for your consideration of this request. Please do not hesitate to contact our organizations as your Committee assembles its 2022 WRDA bill.

Sincerely,

Jack West
Policy and Advocacy Director
Alabama Rivers Alliance

Brett Mayer
Public Policy Director
American Canoe Association

Sarah Kilbourne
Access & Stewardship Chair
American Packrafting Association

Mark Zakutansky
Director of Conservation Policy Engagement
Appalachian Mountain Club

¹ American Whitewater’s database of whitewater accidents and fatalities, maintained since 1972, documents that 10% of river fatalities nationwide are a result of individuals getting caught in a low-head dam hydraulic.

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