

Testimony of Jim Middaugh, Executive Director, Multnomah County Drainage District
House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, Water Resources, and Environment
Subcommittee hearing titled

“Proposals for a Water Resources Development Act of 2022: Stakeholder Priorities”

Tuesday, February 8, 2022

Chairman DeFazio, Chairwoman Napolitano, Ranking Member Graves, and Ranking Member Rouzer, thank you for the opportunity to testify about the efforts to reduce flood risks for the greater Portland region.

My name is Jim Middaugh, I am the executive director of Multnomah County Drainage District (MCDD) and its companion districts that serve as the non-federal sponsors of the 27-mile federally authorized and constructed Portland Metro Levee System located along the lower Columbia River in the Portland, Oregon metropolitan area.

MCDD appreciates this Committee’s commitment to the biannual Water Resources Development Act and Chairman DeFazio’s steadfast support of the US Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) civil works mission, without which our region would be faced with a significant challenge and limited tangible solutions. MCDD received a signed Chief’s Report for the Portland Metro Levee System project last summer. Passage of the WRDA 2022 bill is a critical step in securing greater water infrastructure resiliency for this important international trade corridor.

For those of you who have flown into the Portland International Airport, you’ve seen, but may not have noticed the levee system I’m talking about. These levees, originally constructed in the late 1930s, are the first line of defense in holding back the Columbia River, the fourth largest in the nation by average discharge volume.

Although the levees largely have performed well, as we experience more frequent and severe storms, the levees are showing signs of their age and their structural integrity is threatened along with the lives and livelihoods of everyone who lives and works in this vibrant region. We are proud partners with the Corps on a feasibility study which will help to ensure greater Portland will address the challenges of our changing climate.

The community located behind the Portland Metro Levee System is a cornerstone of the regional, statewide, and national economy. It creates more than \$16 billion in annual economic activity and \$7.2 billion in assessed property values. The levees also reduce the risk of flooding for:

- An at-risk population of approximately 42,000 people during the day and 8,000 people at night.
- 59,000 jobs provided by nearly 2,500 businesses, including more than half of our county’s manufacturing and warehouse jobs, which provide living wages and opportunities for advancement to Americans without four-year degrees.
- The Portland International Airport, which serves nearly 20 million passengers annually and moves millions of tons of goods each year, and the Troutdale Airport, which houses one of the largest combined helicopter and airline flight schools in the country.
- Three interstate highways.
- A light rail transit line that provides service to thousands of riders.

- A Class 1 freight rail line.
- Critical regional electricity transmission facilities owned by the Bonneville Power Administration, Pacific Power, and Portland General Electric.
- Back up drinking water supply for more than one million people.
- An US Air National Guard Base that is home to the 142nd Fighter Wing, which provides critical 24/7 air defense for the greater Pacific Northwest, and to the 304th Air Force Reserve Rescue Squadron, a rapid response search and rescue unit.
- A new \$93 million US Postal Service processing center.
- More than 2,000 acres of parks and natural spaces that provide habitat to multiple endangered and protected species and provide access to nature for underserved communities.

I am here today on behalf of the non-federal sponsors of the PMLS and Levee Ready Columbia, a coalition of public, private, and nonprofit organizations that have come together to modernize our flood safety infrastructure and the way it is managed. Our goal is to ensure our system meets federal safety standards and the needs of the region, state, and nation for the next generation and beyond.

Levee Ready Columbia completed the first comprehensive geotechnical assessment of the levees to determine their condition, finding several significant vulnerabilities that would need to be improved to meet FEMA's standards, as well as the safety needs of the region and the increasing flood safety demands created by climate change.

Thanks to our ongoing partnership with the Corps Portland District, Northwestern Division and Headquarters -- and the steadfast support of Oregon's Congressional Delegation -- the PMLS was designated for a Corps' Feasibility Study through the Balanced Budget Act of 2018. The study leveraged our previous work and conducted an even more thorough investigation of the infrastructure. And, it created a Recommended Plan to increase the resilience and operability of the system.

The study was completed early and under budget and a Chief's Report was signed in August 2021. I'll note that when we started this process, Lt General Scott Spellmon was serving as the Commander of the Corps Northwestern Division. The commitment and support he provided for this study in its early days were reflected by his recent signing of the project's Chiefs Report in his current role as the Corps' Chief of Engineers.

During Lieutenant General Spellmon's appearance before this Committee just a few weeks ago, he remarked that the Corps doesn't do anything alone. Just as the Corps needs its partners to tackle complex infrastructure challenges, the Portland region needed the expertise and guiding hand of the Corps during the feasibility process. We are grateful to have received the support of the federal government.

The designation of a "new start study" and the completion of the Corps' SMART planning process was an important opportunity for our region, providing us with a much deeper knowledge of the limits and vulnerabilities of our current levee system; the economic benefits the system provides the region, state, and nation; the risks we face annually, and the risks posed by evolving river conditions and climate change.

The Recommended Plan includes approximately \$130 million in investments and has a benefit cost ratio of 3.7 to 1. This plan addresses major vulnerabilities in the system including constructing a real levee

alongside an old railroad embankment that has served as the western edge of the system for more than 80 years – even though it was never intended or designed to be a levee. This is the same railroad embankment that breached on May 31, 1948, leading to the inundation and destruction of the city of Vanport, the death of at least 15 people, and the displacement of nearly 20,000 people. Even though the destruction of Vanport was part of the impetus for the international Columbia River Treaty among Canada and the United States, which is currently under renegotiation dozens of years later, the vulnerable infrastructure that failed requires our attention and our investment.

While the benefit-to-cost ratio of our project is favorable, we appreciate the direction Congress provided in previous WRDA bills to improve how Corps projects are evaluated. A more comprehensive approach that incorporates climate, equity and natural areas would certainly yield an even more favorable BCR for this project. For example, the western end of our project area is largely open space.

Following the devastation of the Vanport flood, the region made the conscious decision to maintain the area for recreation and habitat instead of rebuilding neighborhoods in a vulnerable area. That decision has served the region well. However, we were surprised to learn that recreational areas carry little to no economic value when it comes to the Corps' benefit to cost formula.

When it comes to reducing flood risks and wise use of floodplains, we think the current BCR process could better reflect the significant benefits of maintaining habitat and recreation in areas at significant risk of flooding. We hope current efforts to develop a more comprehensive approach to BCR calculations will be developed to help worthy communities nationwide meet the appropriately high bar of the federal system.

While we have been working to find ways to improve the infrastructure at the local level, we've also been working to make changes to ensure we are the best possible local sponsors of the system. We are transforming four individual century-old drainage districts to one more modern and sustainable agency ready to support the ongoing operations, maintenance, and capital investments needed to meet the flood safety needs of the region.

Thanks to the support of the Oregon legislature and the Levee Ready Columbia coalition, we are making great strides to complete this transition and we are ready to meet the local cost share requirements to move into the design phase with the Corps right away. Should Congress provide appropriations, we are also on track to advance the construction phase of the project by federal fiscal year 2025.

Finally, I would like to associate MCDD with testimony submitted by the National Association of Flood and Stormwater Management Agencies. NAFSMA's WRDA 2022 priorities include creating a more responsive and flexible federal system to address the nation's diverse flood risk reduction challenges. While not every NAFSMA WRDA 2022 priority is directly applicable to the Portland region, we stand in support of our fellow NAFSMA members who are working to address the unique characteristics of their watersheds and changing climates.

Congress and the Corps made significant investments in this infrastructure 80 years ago. Those investments helped our region become the economic powerhouse it is today. Now, the economic livelihoods of people throughout Oregon and the Pacific Northwest, and the health and safety of the river, are reliant on continued protection provided by this infrastructure. On behalf of the local sponsors

and the many people and species that rely on it, please renew your investment by authorizing the Portland Metro Levee System project in the 2022 Water Resources Development Act.

Thank for the opportunity to share this information with you today.