



History of Wheat Movement on the Columbia-Snake

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- 1870's: Wheat from Eastern Washington, Eastern Oregon, and Northern Idaho is first carried down the river system via steamship to Portland. The wheat, contained in large burlap sacks, is milled into flour or exported directly to countries in East Asia, South America, and even as far away as England. Steamships are able to navigate the river system from Portland up the Columbia River to Wenatchee, Washington and up the Snake River to Lewiston, Idaho; though overland portage is required at the Cascade Rapids and Celilo Falls.
- 1880's: Heyday of the movement of wheat via steamship down the Columbia-Snake River. Numerous new companies are formed and the amount of tonnage hauled increases greatly. However, rail lines begin to be built on the south bank of the Columbia River to compete.
- 1893: Rail lines stretching from Portland to Eastern Washington are completed. A large amount of the wheat shipped via steamship is shifted to rail since it does not have to deal with portages around the rapids.
- 1896: The Cascade Locks and Canal are completed, allowing steamships to bypass the Cascade Rapids. Wheat movement via steamship increases.
- 1910: The Army Corp of Engineers begins a series of improvement works on the Columbia and Snake Rivers. Over the next few years troublesome areas are dynamited at the John Day Rapids, Squally Hook Rapids, Canoe Encampment rapids, Umatilla Rapids, and Homley Rapids on the Columbia River.
- 1916: The Celilo Locks and Canal are completed, allowing steamships to bypass Celilo Falls. Steamships are able to carry wheat without portage. However, steamship movements of wheat continue to decline in favor of movements by rail which at the time is more efficient.
- 1920's: Wheat shipment shifts from bagged wheat to bulk wheat. Rail boxcars make the transition easily, while steamships are unable to do so. By 1923, wheat shipment via steamship ceases.
- 1934: Construction begins on Bonneville Dam. Farmers and other groups successfully lobby for the dam to include a set of navigation locks.
- 1938: Bonneville Dam is completed. Diesel powered tugs and barges begin hauling wheat through the dam locks and Celilo Canal and Locks to as far as Umatilla where movement is blocked by the Umatilla rapids. The barges require a deeper channel than the old steamships. Tugs and barges shoot the rapids between Umatilla and The Dalles.
- 1951: The locks at McNary Dam are completed and the Umatilla Rapids are flooded. Tugs and grain barges gain access to Pasco, Washington at the mouth of the Snake River.

- 1957: The locks at The Dalles Dam are completed and Celilo Falls is flooded. The amount of grain brought down by barges greatly increases due to its cheaper cost compared to hauling by rail.
- 1962: The locks at Ice Harbor Dam are completed. Tugs and grain barges gain access as far as Windust, Washington on the Snake River.
- 1968: The locks at the John Day Dam are completed, flooding the remaining areas of minor rapids on the Columbia River and greatly improving the efficiency of barge travel on the river system. Barge traffic dominates wheat movement in the Pacific Northwest.
- 1969: The locks at Lower Monumental Dam are completed. Tugs and grain barges gain access as far as Lyons Ferry, Washington on the Snake River.
- 1970: The locks at Little Goose Dam are completed. Tugs and grain barges gain access as far as Almota, Washington on the Snake River.
- 1975: The locks at Lower Granite Dam are completed. Tugs and grain barges gain access as far as Lewiston, Idaho. Over the next twenty-five years moving wheat by barges becomes so dominant in the Pacific Northwest that in many areas rail loaders are dismantled and many short lines are closed.
- 1981: The Army Corp of Engineers scraps plans to build Ben Franklin Dam on the Columbia River north of Pasco and add navigation locks to the Priest Rapids Dam, Wanapum Dam, and Rock Island Dam, which would have given barge access to Wenatchee, Washington.
- 1990's: Height of grain barge movements on the Columbia-Snake River system with many farmers in western Montana trucking their grain to Lewiston to be moved by barge.
- 2000's: Changing overseas market conditions result in a decline in wheat exports from the Portland area. Consequently, grain barge movements peak and start to decline. Rising fuel costs affect trucking and lead to an increase in rail movements in areas farther away from the river system.
- 2010: The Army Corp of Engineers close the navigation locks at The Dalles Dam, John Day Dam, and Lower Monumental Dam for three months in order to carry out long-term repairs. The closure causes widespread short-term disruption for the Pacific Northwest wheat industry.
- 2016: The Army Corp of Engineers close the navigation locks at Bonneville Dam, The Dalles Dam, McNary Dam, Ice Harbor Dam, Lower Monumental Dam, and Little Goose Dam for three months in order to carry out long-term repairs. The closure causes widespread short-term disruption for the Pacific Northwest wheat industry.