

Benton County Fire District 6 (Rolland Watt)

Washington State Department of Ecology
Spill Prevention, Preparedness, and Response Program

Subject: Request to Improve Oil Spill Response Capability on the Columbia River Between McNary Dam and John Day Dam

Dear Washington Department of Ecology,

I am writing on behalf of Benton County Fire District 6 (BCFD6) to request your consideration and assistance in improving local oil spill response capabilities along the Columbia River between McNary Dam and John Day Dam.

Benton County Fire District 6 is a small fire district that covers approximately 30 miles of the Columbia River, beginning approximately three miles east of McNary Dam and extending west to the Benton County line. Our district has mutual aid agreements with agencies along the Columbia River extending west toward John Day Dam, covering approximately another 30 miles of river. We also maintain mutual aid relationships with agencies east of McNary Dam, including agencies serving the Tri-Cities area.

The entire length of this river corridor presents significant risks associated with both commercial river traffic and the BNSF Railway. A spill, derailment, vessel incident, or other release of petroleum or hazardous materials could have serious and potentially long-lasting consequences. Along this corridor are wildlife preserves, agricultural operations, irrigation systems, waterways, and other environmentally sensitive areas that could be severely impacted by a major spill.

This corridor also represents essentially the entire length of the Department of Ecology's area of interest for which our district may be among the first local fire-service resources available to respond. As a small rural fire district, however, our initial response capability is limited. A significant incident would require mutual aid and specialized resources from other agencies, which necessarily takes time to mobilize and arrive.

BCFD6 currently has a fire boat, but that vessel has aged beyond its reliable service life and is increasingly unreliable. Our ability to operate safely and effectively on the river is therefore limited. With appropriate equipment and resources, however, our district could provide a substantially more capable initial response.

Specifically, an appropriately equipped response boat, along with oil-spill response equipment such as containment boom, could allow BCFD6 personnel to begin an immediate response while additional resources are mobilized. We could potentially deploy containment boom, establish initial containment or protection around vulnerable areas, and take other appropriate actions to reduce the spread and environmental impact of a spill before specialized response agencies arrive.

We recognize that BCFD6 is not intended to replace the specialized capabilities of the Department of Ecology or other state, federal, or private-sector spill response organizations. Rather, our goal is

to provide an effective ****initial local response capability**** that can bridge the critical period between notification of an incident and the arrival of additional resources.

We respectfully request that the Department of Ecology work with Benton County Fire District 6 to evaluate opportunities for improving our river response capability. This could include assistance with obtaining a reliable response boat, containment boom and associated deployment equipment, spill response equipment, training, or other resources that would allow our personnel to safely initiate an effective response.

Our district is uniquely positioned to provide an immediate local response along this portion of the Columbia River, and our existing mutual aid agreements provide a foundation for expanding that response as an incident develops. An investment in local capability could provide an important first line of defense for the river, wildlife, agriculture, irrigation infrastructure, and communities that depend upon it.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with Department of Ecology representatives, tour the area together, and discuss the risks and response gaps that currently exist. We would also appreciate the opportunity to explore available grant programs, equipment resources, training opportunities, or other partnerships that could help address these needs.

Thank you for your consideration and for the Department's continued commitment to protecting Washington's waterways and natural resources. We believe that strengthening the initial response capability of BCFD6 would provide a meaningful benefit to the entire Columbia River corridor and would complement the larger regional response system.

Respectfully,

Fire Chief Rolland Watt
Benton County Fire District 6