

Galen Torneby

To the Washington Department of Ecology,

I am submitting this comment to oppose the proposed Chehalis River Basin Flood Damage Reduction Project centered on construction of a large flood-retention dam near Pe Ell.

Flooding is a natural and necessary river process. Rivers evolved to spread out across floodplains, deposit sediment, recharge groundwater, and maintain habitat complexity. Artificially constraining this system with a dam and temporary reservoir interrupts sediment transport, alters temperature regimes, and degrades downstream ecological function. Decades of river science show that floodplain reconnection, setback levees, and land-use changes reduce flood risk more reliably than single-structure controls.

Large flood-control dams routinely underperform in real flood events. Climate-driven storm variability increases the likelihood that reservoirs will be either full at the wrong time or overwhelmed by events exceeding design assumptions. This project would lock the region into a rigid, high-risk strategy while reducing flexibility to adapt to future hydrologic uncertainty.

Salmon and steelhead populations will be harmed. The Chehalis River supports critical anadromous fish runs that depend on cold, connected, sediment-rich systems. Temporary reservoirs increase water temperatures, delay migration, and trap sediment needed to rebuild downstream spawning gravels. These impacts are well documented in flood-control reservoirs throughout the Pacific Northwest.

Tribal treaty rights and cultural resources are placed at risk. Degradation of fish runs directly affects treaty-protected fishing rights and cultural continuity. A project that knowingly threatens salmon recovery conflicts with state and federal commitments to Tribes and undermines long-standing co-management responsibilities.

Dam removal has repeatedly proven successful.

Recent examples demonstrate that restoring rivers produces rapid and measurable ecological and economic benefits:

- On the Elwha River, salmon returned to upstream habitat within months of dam removal, sediment rebuilt beaches and estuaries, and water quality improved.
- On the Klamath River, the largest dam removal in U.S. history is already restoring fish passage to hundreds of miles of habitat and improving water quality conditions linked to toxic algal blooms.

These projects show that working with natural systems delivers durable results — while new dams repeat mistakes the region is actively undoing elsewhere.

The proposed \$2 billion cost is fiscally irresponsible. This investment would divert funding from proven strategies such as:

- Floodplain buyouts and relocations
- Setback levees
- Wetland and side-channel restoration

- Land-use changes in high-risk areas
- Green infrastructure that absorbs floodwater naturally

These approaches reduce flood damage while enhancing habitat, recreation, and long-term resilience.

A single mega-dam concentrates risk instead of spreading protection. If the structure fails, underperforms, or is mis-operated during extreme events, downstream communities will bear the consequences. Distributed, nature-based solutions provide layered safety without creating a catastrophic failure point.

Conclusion

This project represents a 20th-century solution to a 21st-century problem. It would:

- Degrade a functioning river system
- Harm salmon and steelhead
- Undermine Tribal rights
- Consume billions better spent on proven methods
- Increase long-term climate vulnerability

I urge the Department of Ecology to reject the dam proposal and prioritize floodplain reconnection, watershed-scale restoration, and community-centered flood risk reduction instead.

Thank you for considering this comment.

Sincerely,
Galen Torneby