

Cowlitz Hydroelectric Project
FERC No. 2016
Cowlitz Fisheries Technical Committee
Final Meeting Summary
January 7, 2025 from 9:30 – 2:30

FTC Representative Attendees:

Melora Shelton	TPU
Bryce Glaser	WDFW
Andrew Luymes	ECY
Amy Kocourek	NMFS
Jonathan Stumpf	TU

Additional Attendees:

Anne Baxter	ECY
Thomas Starkey-Owens	ECY
Josua Holowatz	WDFW
Brian Gale	WDFW
John Serl	WDFW
Kris Warner	WDFW
Kevin Young	WDFW
Todd Hillson	WDFW
Sean Toomey	WDFW
Sean Luis	TPU
Matt Bleich	TPU
Matt Peter	TPU
Jenise Bauman	TPU
Scott Gibson	TPU
Sean Luis	TPU
Chris Vaughn	TPU
Eric Shoblom	TPU
Michael Boyles	BPA
Ann Weckback	Lewis County
Laura Wolfe	LCPUD
Steve West	LCFRB
Lyn Wiltse	PDSA Consulting / Facilitator

Public Attendees: Larry Pryor, Randy LeDuc, and Jack Tipping

Remaining 2025 FTC Meeting Dates: Feb. 4, Mar. 4, Apr. 1 (no foolin'), May 6, June 3, Aug. 5, Sept. 2 (day after Labor Day), Oct. 7, Nov. 4, Dec. 2

Approval of December Meeting Summary

The revised version of the December FTC Meeting Summary was reviewed and approved with clarifying edits and will be posted for public review.

Updates

Announcements

- We were pleased to meet Sean Luis, Tacoma's new fish passage biologist, who was hired in December. After getting his PhD from University of California, Davis, he worked as a consultant for a few years and is happy to be back in Washington State, where he grew up.
- Andrew announced he will be on parental leave through mid-March. In the meantime, please keep Thomas and Chad in the loop. He and his wife are expecting their first child this Thursday!
- Melora noted as we begin the new year, we will be more mindful about following the public protocols established in 2022, including the 3-minute comment limit.
- Melora reminded all that they can find the Riffe Lake Restoration updates by Googling "Riffe Lake Restoration." An email will follow when the website has been officially launched.
- The initial Transition Plan (for Fall Chinook) presentation will occur at the February FTC meeting, as will the CRR/M&E HAP follow up.
- Tacoma is currently hiring seasonals (day and night tech positions) at the Cowlitz Falls Fish Facility and welcomes any recommendations.
- LCPUD has hired Nate Anderson to fill Russell Page's former position. Nate has been a longtime operator with the PUD and will likely attend the February FTC Meeting.

Hydro Operations (presentation emailed on Jan. 6)

- Inflows: After low inflows throughout the fall, December ended with flows back to 100% of the historical average. December precipitation was 128% of average and temperatures were overall slightly warmer than normal.
- Storage: Riffe Lake increased from 713 ft (Dec.6) to 736 ft (Jan. 6) following substantial precipitation and is currently well above the recent, and long-term averages. All boat ramps are open. Snowpack continues to build and is above average at Paradise and White Pass. Reminder that these SNOTELs are >4,000 ft.
- Outflow: Consistent outflow above the minimum flow (4.2K cfs) with recent increases as inflows came up and side flow management was required. No exceedances. Melora reviewed an example of down ramping compliance.
- 10-day Forecast: Below normal precipitation with typical temperatures. Inflows are expected to decrease (below normal). Snow level is expected to drop below 3K ft on Friday. Riffe Lake will maintain, then draft. Outflows will likely drop from 8.7K cfs to ~6K cfs, except if needed for load. NOAA expects La Niña condition to develop in January and transition to neutral March to May.
- Regarding reservoir elevations and management winter going into spring; Melora noted we are in a robust position compared to last month.

Water Quality

- Matt P reported no spill events or water quality monitoring for TDG, etc.
- Tacoma is planning to collect additional water quality data as covariates to the upcoming CFNSC Passage Study and the Coho Parr Study.

Related Project Updates

- Two derelict vessels were removed from Mayfield, in cooperation with DNR and with an approved contractor. The work to remove other derelict vessels and structures will continue.
- Debris removal management across all projects is also planned. The recommendation on collection and disposal in an environmentally friendly way is expected by the end of Q2.
- Kosmos: At the request of Ecology, Tacoma is conducting additional sampling for copper, to determine, by next month, if it should be listed as a contaminant.

- Cove Lane Culvert Replacement Project: This project has been completed.
- North Taidnapam Boat Launch Improvement Project: Phase 1 was completed except for the lower anchor, which should be installed when reservoir elevations go down in the spring. This will be done as part of Phase 2 (lower-level parking area, trail, ADA loading platform, etc.).
- Trout Hatchery Rebuild: Drilling to inform water supply should wrap up by the end of February.

Fish Facilities

Separator:

Eric reported that, as expected, returns continue to decrease (~300 returned last week.) Most of the returns are coho. Winter-run steelhead numbers are increasing and there are a small amount of cutthroat trout and summer steelhead still coming in.

- Coho: Remain above the 5-year average. 58.6K adults have returned to the separator this season with another ~8K jacks. The goal is to transport 12,000 HOR coho to the Tilton River by the end of the season. As of Jan. 3, 11.8K HORs have been sent to the Tilton. Coho broodstock collection started Sept. 3 and was complete Jan. 3. They were able to maintain a 50% pNOB (proportion of natural origin broodstock). Spawning started Nov. 11. With collection now complete, spawning will continue for a few weeks in January.
- Fall Chinook: At the last FTC meeting, the fall Chinook run was just finishing up with the total season return to the separator of 2.2K, just below the 5-year average of 2.7K. This included NORs incorporated into the integrated brood and those transported to the Tilton. Brood collection ended Nov. 18, and spawning was completed shortly thereafter. Less than half of the egg take goal was collected.
- Summer Steelhead: Returns were good this year at 6.3K, well above the 4K 5-year average. Broodstock collection was completed on Sept. 25. Spawning started the end of November and was completed around the third week of December.
- Spring Chinook: Spring Chinook are no longer returning but as a recap, we collected 6.6K adults this year, which is twice as many as the 5-year average of 3K. Thankfully, we made brood this year. The 2025 returns should start returning to the separator in February or March.
- Cutthroat Trout: The run is nearly over and is at about half of the 5-year average of 2.7K.
- Winter Steelhead: Returns are continuing to increase as it is still early in the season. They are currently above the 5-year average.

Release Sites: All release sites are in good working condition and are being used as intended. All NORs and half of the HOR coho are being released into Scanewa for the Upper Cowlitz River.

Mayfield Coho Net Pens: Eric reported the fish in the pens are happy and healthy. Their size is right on track with the hatchery population at 28-29fpp and mortality is very low at less than 0.1% to date.

Cowlitz Trout Hatchery Remodel: Drilling and testing new well locations continues at the Trout Hatchery. Eric hopes the results will be back in time to share at the next FTC meeting. They are also checking on the porosity of the soil for when they do the remodel (a civil engineering exercise that will inform the future design of the stormwater system for the remodeled facility).

Satellite Rearing

Satellite Rearing: Tacoma continues to investigate options including facility testing at Cowlitz Falls. Stay tuned.

Mayfield Counting House

Chris noted operations ceased operations on Dec. 31 and the counting house is in bypass mode until Apr. 1. In the meantime, the facility operated in 24-hour cycles once in January, February, and March. Numbers are typically low during the off season. The numbers are low for Chinook smolts, and about average for coho smolts, steelhead, and cutthroat. They are still within the normal range taking all species into consideration. Chinook sub-yearling numbers have fallen off while yearling numbers have remained high. Tacoma continues to work with the WDFW Fish pathologist on how parasite load is recorded based on fish size. This will kick off when the facility is fully operating again.

Cowlitz Falls Fish Facility

Chris introduced the CFFF DD which contains three proposed items. 1) Continuation of the alternative tagging while developing models aimed at enhancing FCE evaluation performance, 2) conducting the CFNSC acoustic telemetry study, and 3) developing a performance evaluation around the idea of moving coho parr downstream of the Barrier Dam. The draft DD will be sent to the FTC with the meeting materials before the February meeting for review.

M&E Subgroup

The DD approved at the December FTC meeting and sent out for 7-day electronic approval by voting members not present was approved as anticipated.

Jenise reported the Subgroup did not meet in December and will meet again Jan. 15. They left off talking regarding life cycle modeling. They are reviewing what has been done so far in the basin including the USGS coho model and WDFW integrated population models with Lower Columbia chum. Transition Plan presentations will begin with fall Chinook. They are working collaboratively to create a template that can also be used with other species moving forward. They will also be discussing Charter development and other priorities for 2025, including Jack Tipping's steelhead rearing proposal, an approach for consolidating M&E data, and distinguishing spring and fall Chinook broodstock (using DNA). She will send the agenda out tomorrow morning. The agenda will include fall Chinook SARs.

FTC Work Plan / Protocols

Presenter: Melora Shelton

Melora showed the draft 2025 FTC Work Plan and Protocols and noted a target of March this year, rather than April in previous years.

Melora highlighted areas she had updated and/or flagged for discussion including the list of plans referenced in the SA, public comments, and subcommittee details. Bryce noted that WDFW could help with the list of plans, and others are requested to provide input as well. Melora suggested incorporating public comment protocols included in the 2022 DD adopted quarterly public meetings and potentially revisiting that language. She identified that protocols around how subcommittees are established, how they coordinate with the FTC, and follow-up reporting should either be adjusted or followed more closely. Bryce thanked Melora for those suggestions and looks forward to being more cognizant of following them. It would be nice to have some standardized tools available, like reporting templates. For reference, Melora has examples of charters developed by subcommittees in the past. All agreed the CRR Charter is a good template. Bryce can share some charters from the Lewis project to share as well.

Melora also reviewed the roles of signatory parties who are voting members, the decision-making protocol that describes the three-meeting process followed for DDs (and flexibility as needed), and language describing when DDs are required. WDFW can offer comments on how to strengthen descriptions based on their experience on other projects.

The Draft 2025 Work Plan Document has been updated including some changes to the regular update categories (e.g., addition of Capital Project Updates) and scheduled updates (e.g., FHMP transition planning updates). It includes the usual schedule for 30-day review ahead of FERC report filing and in-person meeting schedule. Many of the usual updates will be integrated into transition plan updates so they will have more context and potentially be seen as actionable.

Action Items:

- Anyone who has a version of the TWG Charter, please send it to Melora.
- Melora will distribute the draft 2025 Work Plan and Protocols for feedback with an eye toward finalizing them at the March FTC meeting (no DD required).

LCPUD Dam Operations

Presenter: Laura Wolfe (on behalf of Joe First)

Laura reported sediment removal in front of unit trash racks is scheduled for March 3-28. The plan is for this to become an annual activity.

Sluice Gate Replacement: Due to FERC safety concerns this project will likely be delayed by around five years.

Boat Barrier Replacement: The contractor is set to pour the first anchor next week and the second the week after that. The third anchor is scheduled to be installed in mid-February and the boat barrier should be installed in March.

Mayfield Downstream Passage Remodel

Presenter: Matt Bleich

Matt reminded all of the PPT presentation he shared at the December FTC meeting (and emailed out the following day). He acknowledged this is a big project and Tacoma wants to allow the FTC sufficient time to consider what is being recommended and provide input. After getting FTC buy-in, Tacoma will move forward with an eye toward completing construction by 2028.

Bryce has not yet had time to discuss the recommendation with members of WDFW's Fish Passage Engineering Team to see if they have concerns or suggestions. He hopes to engage them this month. He also recommended using the DD process for this recommendation and volunteered to partner with Matt on that. He also noted he is still interested in some of the monitoring.

Amy is in a similar situation as she has reached out to the NOAA Engineering Group and is waiting for them to get back to her about when they are available to discuss this with her.

Matt thanked both and offered Tacoma's support in those discussions. Tacoma hopes to get the decision by end of Q1 of this year so they can secure a Project Manager, funding authority, etc. Melora suggested Tacoma specifically write out what *the ask* is and where they are looking for technical feedback.

Action Items:

- Matt: Draft the DD, with Bryce's help as needed, and clarify the feedback being sought.
- Amy: Let Bryce know who is assigned to her ticket and he can see if coordination across agencies is possible.

Cowlitz Restoration and Recovery Fund

Presenter: Steve West

Steve reminded the FTC of key grant round dates and then provided an update on the current status of all ten CRR habitat projects that have been funded to date. This information will be included in the annual CRR report (FTC 30-day review in March). Steve and Melora noted that many of the current projects lead to potential additional projects (e.g., projects that deliver designs for future funding). Steve also provided an update on the Cowlitz Wildlife Area Spears Unit Design, which was awarded a Salmon Recovery Funding Board grant in 2024. This is a design-only project. WDFW is the project sponsor, the Lower Columbia Fish Enhancement Group (LCFEG) is the partner, and Tacoma Power is the property owner. The January 10 LCFRB meeting will include approval of 2025 SFRB and CRR grant round materials, which authorizes LCFRB staff to open the grant rounds on January 13. Changes in the 2025 Grant Manual include adjusting the scoring spread from 0-500 to 0-100 total points, changing the number of evaluation questions from 14 to 10, and streamlining evaluation questions.

Downstream Adaptive Management Technical Work Group (TWG)

Presenter: Chris Vaughn

Chris introduced DD 2025-02 that covered:

- Continuing alternative tagging and the development of models to enhance FCE evaluation performance
- Conducting the CFFF North Shore Collector Acoustic Telemetry Study this year
- Starting to move coho salmon parr downstream of the Barrier Dam and develop a framework to evaluate performance.

Internal discussions are continuing on this as they draft the DD. Tacoma welcomes feedback prior to, as well as during the Feb. FTC meeting. A revised DD will be sent out after that meeting for a two-week review. Any additional feedback will be reflected in the final draft of the DD sent out for approval at the March FTC meeting.

Action Item: Chris to prepare the initial draft DD to be sent to the FTC on Jan. 28 along with the agenda and any other related documents for the Feb. 4 FTC meeting.

Public Comment Period #1 - Agenda related

Jack: Asked if nematodes were present in the Chinook at the Mayfield trap and noted that he sees lots of nematode- infected fish in Riffe (expected as Riffe is warmer than Mayfield).

Chris noted discussions are ongoing with WDFW's Sean Roon (who does the subsamples) on this.

Jack: Looking forward to the Feb, FTC meeting when the Chinook Transition Plan will be discussed and expressed concerns about the program include returns and out-of-basin harvest (0.5% of the North of Falcon allocation). He is disturbed that opportunities for spring Chinook are being sacrificed to provide only very few fall Chinook out of basin. He would like to see spring Chinook reared to a larger size (optimum releases are 5 to the lb.).

Eric responded that there could be room in the hatchery to do that and that the intent is to continue the coho pilot. Bryce added that there is a plan with 4 components to evaluate the fall Chinook program: The SAR analysis (which will include a formal fishery assessment), life cycle modeling, summary of marking data at Mayfield, and limiting factors analysis.

Larry: Asked when and how can members of the public make presentations to the FTC. He noted that after attending the April Public Utility Board meeting, that Chairperson directed them to the FTC.

This has been addressed previously. Matt reiterated that the Board has asked the public to come to the FTC with technical questions and comments, Matt clarified that this direction was not for presentations. There is a subgroup working on a process for presentations. FTC stands for Fisheries Technical Committee, and it is a recommending body.

Larry: Learned a new term “spummers” for summer run springers and noted that run timing of returns keeps moving back. In 2024 only 29% returned by May 28; 35% in 2023, and 24% in 2022.

Randy: Asked about possibly increasing egg take to expand the gene pool and potentially address non-biting fish returns and noted that it could be a low-cost, simple improvement.

Eric responded that egg take goals are set based on expected mortality at the hatchery. Changes would be an M&E topic. Bryce added that proposals for program changes should come through the APR process.

Randy: Asked if there is an integrated program starting on the coho, related to questions on biter vs non-biter fish.

John responded there is an integrated program (2012-2024). The plan going forward is for a coho program of 2.1 million coho smolt release with a 50% pNOB.

Topics for February 4, 2025 FTC Meeting

- Updates incl. Hydro Ops, Water Quality
- Initial Update on FHMP Transition Plan Implementation – Chinook
 - APR / Science Meeting
- Fish Facilities, Satellite Rearing Ponds, Cispus Release Site, Mayfield Downstream Fish Passage Remodel, Coho Net Pen Project, , Trout Hatchery Remodel
- CFNSC 2025 Plans
- LCPUD Cowlitz Falls Dam Operations
- FTC Work Plan / Protocols – public presentations
- Downstream Adaptive Management TWG
 - Coho Parr Study design alternatives
- Monitoring and Evaluation Subgroup – Introduce DD
- CRR Fund HAP Subcommittee
- Mayfield Downstream Fish Passage Remodel
- Preview March FTC Meeting Topics

Public Comment Period #2 – Any Topic

Larry: Wished the numbers were high enough for retention of NOR coho.

This has been addressed previously. Bryce responded WDFW can't allow retention of NORs because they are ESA-listed, and we don't have ESA coverage that allows for that direct harvest. WDFW is in charge of fisheries management. WDFW is working on developing an updated Fisheries Management Evaluation Plan (FMEP) to submit to NOAA this June. They are working on the Lower Columbia River FMEP first (includes the Cowlitz).

Randy: Asked whether the hook mortality study conducted a few years ago been completed/ published and noted the outcome will impact fishing in this state. Was the problem more with barb placement vs. the barbed hook itself?

Bryce responded that Thomas Buehrens is a co-author of the report which has been published. In brief, hooking locations matter, and it varies by species. Information from the study is being

incorporated into models regarding release mortalities in the fisheries as part of the FMEP update. This will be discussed further in North of Falcon this spring. He will send the article links to Lyn to distribute.

Larry: Asked about the best way to make comments during the spring APR process (e.g., springer release size comments he made last fall), and how comments are addressed.

Matt thanked Larry for his interest/concern with the APR process and responded that there is more time (no 3-minute limit) for members of the public to provide comments within that process. When Tacoma receives a clear request/recommendation, they do their best to acknowledge what they heard and how they plan to move forward.

Larry: Asked whether it is proper to reach out to Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) about WQ concerns outside of FTC meetings, given the 3-minute comment limit during meetings?

Matt B and Melora responded yes, and Matt noted the FTC has a certain set of tasks they are trying to complete. For things members of the public want to bring up that are outside those tasks, it should be done by consensus of the entire committee. Matt is happy to direct members of the public to the right SME for issues outside the purview of the FTC. He does this while balancing time and resource constraints.

Larry: Commented that he feels training is needed around water quality and water quality testing to assess the impact of water chemistry changes. He is concerned about the water hardness at the Cowlitz.

Matt responded that Tacoma's SMEs are the right way to go in this case. Andrew added that he also has exchanged emails with Larry on water quality. He noted Ecology is mindful of the water quality conditions in the Cowlitz River— not the hatcheries per se. Ecology's Water Quality Atlas includes specific parameters in the Cowlitz. Water hardness is naturally variable and there is no Ecology criteria for that parameter.

Meeting Evaluation

- Well attended once again.
- Nice that Chat function is accessible once again.
- Good discussion re protocols and what is important to preserve.
- Open discussions.
- Happy to meet Sean

Josua's Inspirational Quote

"New year — a new chapter, new verse, or just the same old story? Ultimately we write it. The choice is ours." — Alex Morritt

Closing Remarks

Melora thanked everyone and said it will be nice to get back to a better annual cadence with the APR occurring once again in the spring. Tacoma very much appreciates all the new faces at the table and are working forward to working together on resources we all value.

Parking Lot

- Review Steelhead Kelt Recycling Program