

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

September 7, 2021

contact: Evyn Mitchell  
[emitchell@mcdd.org](mailto:emitchell@mcdd.org)  
cell 971-285-0677



### Plan to Strengthen the Portland Metro Levee System Approved by the US Army Corps of Engineers

Portland, Ore. – After three years of work, the Commander of the [US Army Corps of Engineers](#) (the Corps) has approved recommendations to make the 27-mile levee system along the Columbia River in the Portland metro area more resilient and reliable for the next fifty years and beyond.

The recommendations are the result of a federally funded flood risk reduction feasibility study conducted by the [Portland District of the Corps](#). This study was designated in 2018 thanks to the support of Oregon’s Congressional delegation led by [US Senator Ron Wyden](#), [US Senator Jeff Merkley](#), and [Congressman Earl Blumenauer](#), and the advocacy of the [Levee Ready Columbia](#) partnership – a local coalition of public, private, and nonprofit organizations working together to reduce local flood risk.

“It’s important to realize we have this massive levee system along the Columbia River in the Portland area that reduces the risk of flooding,” explained Ken Anderton, Senior Real Estate & Development Manager for the [Port of Portland](#), and Board President of [Multnomah County Drainage District](#) (MCDD), the special district that operates and maintains the local levee system. “This system was originally built before the area became the economic engine and major transportation hub that it is today. The completion and approval of this study puts us in a great position to compete for significant federal investment to make sure our flood safety system is more resilient and reliable for the future.”

“I’m gratified the teamwork with the delegation and local groups here in Portland have paid dividends with this study for an area crucial to generating family-wage jobs in the city, state and region,” Senator Wyden said. “Completion of this study puts us one key step closer to protecting the \$16 billion of annual economic activity that happens behind the levees by making meaningful investments in vital public infrastructure like PDX, three interstate highways, multiple electrical substations, intercontinental freight lines and much more.”

“Climate chaos is not a distant possibility that we can ignore. It’s a brutal reality that has already arrived on Oregonians’ doorsteps in the form of floods, wildfires, droughts, and heat-waves—claiming lives and hurting our economy,” said Senator Merkley. “That’s why now is the time to do everything we can to make our communities as resilient as possible, including by helping Multnomah County install a levee system to keep Oregonians safe from inevitable Columbia River floods. Without action, lives and livelihoods will continue to be put at even greater risk.”

“The mighty Columbia River has shaped who we are and how we use the land around us. While living along this great river provides us with many benefits, it also comes with some risk,” said Congressman Blumenauer. “The Portland Metro Levee System is a first line of defense for tens of thousands of people, vital public infrastructure, and thousands of acres of parks and natural spaces, including habitat for protected animal species. Ensuring the

resiliency of this system is one of many steps we must take to mitigate the effects of climate change and future river conditions.”

The approval of the Feasibility Report and Recommended Plan by the Chief of Engineers marks a major milestone. Next, the study will be routed to the Assistant Secretary of the Army and President Biden’s Office of Management & Budget to determine if it should go to Congress for authorization and appropriations. If the project moves forward without any delays, construction could potentially begin by mid-2025.

The “Recommended Plan” includes a series of projects that will:

- 1. Address points of weakness that could result in levee breaches or overtopping** like widening and fixing the slope along the eastern side of the Peninsula Drainage Canal located just to the west of the Portland International Airport, the Columbia River Correctional Institution, and Dignity Village, and extending and elevating an incomplete floodwall under the I-5 bridge.
- 2. Reduce the risk of internal flooding** by adding pumping capacity and creating redundant power supplies at seven of the 12 pump stations within the system. This includes replacing the sole pump station on far eastern side of the levee system near the Troutdale Airport and the Troutdale Reynolds Industrial Park, which is now home to large Amazon and FedEx distribution centers.
- 3. Eliminate longstanding risk on the western side of the system by building a levee next to the railroad embankment that breached in 1948 leading to the destruction of the City of Vanport and displacement of more than 18,500 people.** Although the embankment has played the role of a levee and has withstood some serious floods, it is an old railroad trestle that was later filled with dirt. As the railroad companies that own the embankment are unwilling to recognize its function and repeatedly deny requests to inspect or test its condition, the Corps ultimately developed a proposal to build a real levee adjacent on the inside of the embankment to eliminate the risk of another breach that could lead to a series of cascading levee failures like it did in 1948.

“The approval of this study is an important step that puts our community on a pathway to secure significant federal investment,” said Michael Jordan, Director of the [City of Portland’s Bureau of Environment Services](#) and Board Chair of the [Urban Flood Safety & Water Quality District](#), a new special district created by the Oregon State Legislature to take over operations of the levee system while contributing to the health of the watershed and improving landscape resilience and environmental justice. “Working with the Corps to modernize our local flood safety infrastructure on the Columbia River and Columbia Slough will allow us to focus limited local resources on other improvements that will help save money and support a healthy environment.”

The complete “Portland Metro Levee System Integrated Feasibility Report & Environmental Assessment” will be published by the Corps and made available online later this year.

##

*Multnomah County Drainage District (MCDD) operates and maintains 27 miles of levees, 12 pump stations, and 45 miles of sloughs, culverts, ditches, and other conveyance infrastructure. MCDD administers three other drainage districts along the south shore of the Columbia River in urban Multnomah County (Peninsula Drainage District #1, Peninsula Drainage District #2 and the Sandy Drainage Improvement Company). These four special districts extend from the edge of Smith & Bybee Lakes on the west to the western shore of the Sandy River on the east. For more information about the Columbia Corridor Drainage Districts and the local levee system, please visit [www.mcdd.org](http://www.mcdd.org).*