



## Transcript

### NOAA Fisheries media teleconference to announce nearly \$240 million for new fish passage projects through the Investing in America agenda

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#### Participants:

- Katie Wagner, NOAA Fisheries Public Affairs
- Janet Coit, Assistant Administrator for NOAA Fisheries
- Carrie Selberg Robinson, Director of NOAA Fisheries Office of Habitat Conservation
- Tisa Shostik, Restoration Center Deputy Division Chief, NOAA Fisheries' Office of Habitat Conservation

**00:00 Katie Wagner:** Good afternoon everyone, my name is Katie Wagner with NOAA Fisheries Public Affairs. And thank you for joining NOAA's media teleconference to announce nearly \$240 million for new fish passage projects through the Investing in America agenda. Our press release is now available in the newsroom on the NOAA.gov website. Joining me today is our speaker Janet Coit, the Assistant Administrator for NOAA Fisheries. With that, I would like to welcome Janet who is joining us for the opening of today's call.

**00:25 Janet Coit:** Thank you, Katie. Thank you all for joining us on our call today. I am thrilled that we are making this Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act announcement today on behalf of the Biden-Harris Administration. This is an unprecedented level of grant funding that will supercharge fish passage and tribal fish passage projects across the country. It is also an unprecedented opportunity to secure funding up to \$20 million, which opens up opportunities for partners to carry out large, ambitious projects. We are recommending nearly \$240 million dollars for 46 new projects this year, plus an additional \$38 million of future year funding.

**01:08 Janet Coit:** This historic level of funding will help recover endangered migratory fish and support sustainable commercial, recreational, and tribal fisheries nationally – while also benefiting myriad other species that depend on healthy ecosystems.

**01:21 Janet Coit:** This Administration is committed to supporting tribes, and we are pleased that 21 of these projects — more than \$112 million in funding — will be led by tribes and tribal organizations. Also half of the remaining projects will directly involve tribes and are aligned with tribal priorities. These fish passage projects will support our nation's fisheries and the many communities that rely on them by reopening migratory pathways and restoring access to healthy habitat for fish across the country.

**01:52 Janet Coit:** Among other actions, will these projects remove unsafe structures like dams that have fallen into disrepair, and also help communities adapt to climate change by reducing the risk of flooding. We are super excited about the opportunities BIL and IRA funding are providing for habitat restoration and fish passage around the country, and we are looking forward to working with partners and amazing outcomes we will see in the years ahead.

**02:20 Katie Wagner:** Thank you so much, Janet. We will now take specific questions about the announcement from the call participants. For this portion of the call we have two subject matter experts on the line to address questions. We have Carrie Selberg Robinson, Director of NOAA Fisheries Office of Habitat Conservation and Tisa Shostik, Restoration Center Deputy Division Chief also with NOAA Fisheries' Office of Habitat Conservation. Operator, please remind the call participants how they can get into the queue to ask a question.

**02:44 Operator:** Thank you, If you would like to ask a question, please press \*1 on your phone and it is \*2 to withdraw your question.

[Pause]

**03:00 Operator:** Once again \*1 if you would like to ask a question.

**03:04 Operator:** Our first question comes from Todd Richmond with Associated Press, your line is open.

**3:11 Todd Richmond (Associated Press):** Hi Janet, I am a little confused about what recommending \$240 million means? Does someone have to...are you saying this project deserves this much money and somebody somewhere has got to stamp that with approval? How does this work?

**03:34 Carrie Robinson:** Hi, this is Carrie Selberg Robinson, I am the director of the Office of Habitat Conservation and I am happy to take that question. So, we are recommending these to our NOAA Grants Management division and we are going through the last stages of our grant process, and during the review process — through these last stages — there might be some light tweaks to numbers, as we work on the final paperwork with these partners. In the coming weeks, we will finalize that paperwork and have a grant agreement with each of these partners. So, they don't need to apply, they just need to go see the last stages of our review process.

**04:34 Janet Coit:** This is Janet, does that answer it for you?

**04:38 Todd Richmond (AP):** Not really.

**04:40 Janet Coit:** Let me say it in a different way. We are announcing the projects that will be receiving this funding. We are not saying the funding is going out the door today, because there is this final step. Once we let the grantees know, before we do the grant agreement and they have the funds in hand. But these are the projects after a very competitive process that have been selected for funding under this program.

**05:06 Todd Richmond (AP):** So this money has been appropriated? It's available?

**5:11 Janet Coit:** Yes, this is money from both the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, supplemented by funding from the Inflation Reduction Act and we have that in hand. We have several grant programs, and today we are announcing two fish passage programs: a tribal fish passage which was specifically for tribal applicants, and a broader fish passage. And these are the grants after a super competitive process that have been selected for the funding, that we have the funds in hand from those legislative affairs.

**5:50 Todd Richmond (AP):** So the projects were already selected?

**5:53 Carrie Robinson:** Correct.

**5:54 Carrie Robinson:** This is Carrie Robinson again. Those projects have all been selected. And the announcement we are making this afternoon — we have the funding in hand, and we are working on the final paperwork and then partners will get started with these projects.

**6:12 Janet Coit:** But Todd, I want to emphasize that it was a competitive grant process. We had about four times the amount of applicants than we have funding. So they were selected through our rigorous review process and these are kind of the top notch projects across the country that will benefit fish, reconnect rivers, and take out impediments. So they are very exciting from a fisheries perspective, in terms of restoring habitat and bringing back healthy migratory other species.

**6:44 Todd Richmond (AP):** Okay, so I guess, in layman's terms, you are announcing the winners, so to speak?

**6:50 Janet Coit:** Yes, yes.

**06:52 Todd Richmond (AP):** That makes sense, thank you.

**06:57 Operator:** Thank you. Our next question comes through Olivia Ebertz with The Public's Radio. Your line is open.

**07:05 Olivia Ebertz (The Public's Radio):** Thank you. I am wondering if there is a deadline that these tribes and other organizations have to finish their projects by?

**07:16 Carrie Robinson:** Hi, this is Carrie Robinson again. There is not a deadline they need to finish it by, but we have a period of time that the funding is available to them and I will have Tisa walk through to a little bit more of detail for you.

**07:31 Tisa Shostik:** Hi, this is Tisa Shostik. Yes, the funding will be available depending on the project start and end date. These are often multiple years that the funding is available for, so the partner, the grantee will receive the funds and they will have anywhere from 3 to 5 years to complete the project.

**07:54 Carrie Robinson:** Does that answer your question?

**07:57 Olivia Ebertz (The Public's Radio):** It does, and, if I could just ask a follow up: How competitive was this process, and how many people didn't win this grant?

**08:09 Carrie Robinson:** Hi, this is Carrie again. The demand for our national fish passage competition was four times higher than the resources that we had.

**08:25 Olivia Ebertz (The Public's Radio):** And so what kinds of things did these types groups have to present in order to, I guess, prove that these dam removals or passageway clearing will increase fish population?

**08:42 Carrie Robinson:** Could you repeat the first part of your question again? I lost that there.

**08:47 Olivia Eberz (The Public's Radio):** Yeah, I am just curious, what kind of application materials the groups had to present in order to prove that their project would make an impact on fish numbers in these areas?

**09:03 Carrie Robinson:** Thank you for repeating that. I am gonna have Tisa talk a little bit about the things we are looking for in applications for these projects.

**09:12 Tisa Shostik:** Hi, this is Tisa again. When we solicit for these projects, when we advertise for them in our funding opportunity announcement, we outline the evaluation criteria that we are looking for. So, the things that we want to hear from the applicant and their proposal in describing their projects to us. Some of those things include the ecological benefits of the project, so we look towards these proposals and these applicants as they are describing the benefits to migratory fish and other ecological benefits that might come out of this project. We are also interested in things like co-benefits alongside these projects so as Janet mentioned in her opening remarks, things like flooding reduction, building resilience — both climate and community resilience — and then we are also looking for the technical merits of the project. Can it be done, how will it be done? And describing the process by which they are proposing to do the project. And then lastly, we are also looking for community engagement: how well are they engaged with the community, how have they reached out to stakeholders, that is another key element that we look for in these project proposals and that we take a look at when we're evaluating them for selection.

**10:40 Olivia Ebertz (The Public's Radio):** Thank you.

**10:49 Operator:** Thank you. The next question comes from Todd Richmond with Associated Press. Your line is open.

**10:57 Todd Richmond (AP):** Hi, thank you for taking another question. I see on the news release the number of projects that are listed like "first round, second round." What does that mean? And the second question I have was: do you have an idea how many are actually dam removal projects?

**11:15 Carrie Robinson:** This is Carrie Robinson again. I will start with the first part of your question. Today, we are announcing our second round of projects for fish passage and tribal fish passage competitions. In December of 2022 is when we made the announcement on round one. One of the exciting things about the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, is that it provides five years of funding to do this fish passage work. So we have taken that funding and we will have three rounds of competitive opportunities for partners to apply to do this work. So round one was announced in December of 2022. Today we are announcing round two, and in the future we will have round three.

**12:20 Todd Richmond (AP):** The \$240 million today is just for round two or, is for round one and round two so far, or are they combined?

**12:25 Carrie Robinson:** That is for round two.

**12:29 Todd Richmond:** Thanks.

**12:33 Operator:** Thank you. The next question comes from Sydney Cromwell from Southern Science. Your line is open.

**12:47 Operator:** Sydney Cromwell with Southern Science. Your line is open.

**12:53 Sydney Cromwell (Southern Science):** Sorry, can you hear me? Hello?

**12:58 Janet Coit:** Yes, we can hear you now.

**13:00 Sydney Cromwell (Southern Science):** Okay sorry about that. My first question was: is there a timeline at this point when round three competition will begin? And my second question was if you could give a general overview of how progress is going on the projects that were funded in round one?

**13:19 Carrie Robinson:** This is Carrie Robinson again. We don't have a timeline for round three yet, but I would anticipate as earlier as later this calendar year or earlier next calendar year. We are still working through these details and staying focused on round two, and then we will turn our attention to round three. In response to round one, one of the exciting things about the projects that we are funding, is that we are funding all stages of the process. So we are funding some projects that are at the ideas stage, they are just designing the project, they are meeting with members of the community, meeting with engineers, thinking about what the needs are, we are funding that kinda work. All the way through the process to construction. And so all of the projects from round one are on various stages of progress, it just looks very different for each project depending on the stage that they are in the process, so we are seeing really exciting progress on round one. If you go to our website, we have some stories where we have been working with partners to get the word out about the exciting work we are doing together in these different places around the country.

**14:56 Sydnew Cromwell (Southern Science):** Okay, thank you.

**15:00 Operator:** Thank you, the next question comes from Todd Richmond with Associated Press, your line is open.

**15:07 Todd Richmond (AP):** Janet, how would you respond to some conservatives, some that are in Congress, that are saying that these projects, especially the dam removal projects are based on shoddy science, and actually are doing more harm than good to the environment? Especially on the Klamath River in Northern California and Oregon, leaving behind silt, and mud plains, and the thought that fish are going to find their way upstream just based on hope, rather than actual science. So, what would you say to that? How will you justify the science behind these passage projects, especially on dam removal?

**15:56 Janet Coit:** This is Janet Coit. Thanks, it just so happens a couple of weeks ago on the Klamath and that is an example of a dam removal project that will benefit multiple species of salmon and it is very very exciting we have seen with projects...let me answer this in a couple of ways. With projects like the Elwha Dam removal, it can take a couple of years. As you know, salmon have a typical life cycle to see the full benefits of recovery. But the projects that we are funding with this, or the dam removal in the Klamath, are based on, from our perspective, the best available science. And we have seen when you provide habitat that fish like salmon are very resilient and they will return, when they have habitat to return to. So when I was on the Klamath, I stopped at the fish trap the Karuk Tribe was maintaining to see what types of fish are coming up the river this spring, and it was very exciting. There was different year classes salmon and, you know, we have every confidence that in those areas that the dams have been taken out, and the river has the chance to re-meander and rebound, that the fish return, and we have seen that happen in other projects, so I have 100% confidence we know about the sedimentation. That particular project was designed to have a base-washing flow to move sediments down the river, but again it is not a miracle that happens overnight. It takes a few years for habitat to be restored, but if you give nature a chance she will rebound.

**17:42 Todd Richmond (AP):** Thank you.

**17:49 Operator:** There are no other questions at this time.

**17:54 Katie Wagner:** With that, I want to again thank today's speakers, Janet Coit, Carrie Selberg Robinson, and Tisa Shostik. An audio file of today's call will be made available online on NOAA.gov following this call.

**18:01 Katie Wagner:** And finally, if you have any follow up questions please contact me, Katie Wagner, at 443-458-8480. Again 443-458-8480. Or at [NMFS.PA@noaa.gov](mailto:NMFS.PA@noaa.gov), that is N M F S (for National Marine Fisheries Services) dot PA @ NOAA dot gov This concludes today's call. Thank you.

**18:27 Operator:** Thank you. Thank you for participating in today's conference, have a wonderful day and you may disconnect.