



Confederated Tribes and Bands
of the Yakama Nation

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Treaty of June 9, 1855

For Immediate Release:

BATEMAN ISLAND CAUSEWAY REMOVAL BEGINS

*Yakama Nation Fisheries celebrates another collaborative milestone with the goal of
“Making it like it was.”*



Bateman Island Causeway removal partners gather for a group photo on Nov. 3, 2025, just east of the causeway. Photo by Michael-David A. Bushman, Yakama Nation Fisheries Public Relations Specialist.

January 5, 2026, RICHLAND, WA — The Yakima and Columbia Rivers will fully reconverge after the removal of the Bateman Island Causeway. Site prep and mobilization of equipment began Dec. 22 with the excavation beginning January 5, 2026.

The man-made causeway, located at the confluence of the two rivers, was illegally constructed over 80 years ago on the south side of the island, possibly by a local farmer for agricultural use, connecting it to the city of Richland.

Essentially acting as a plug, the causeway completely blocks the natural path of the river and inhibits river flow, leading to very warm water temperatures west of the island. This provides ideal conditions for exotic

species that prey on juvenile salmon in the spring and makes it difficult for adult salmon to swim upstream in the summer.

In summer 2024, due to high water temperatures in the Yakima River Delta, at least 75 adult sockeye salmon were found dead with likely hundreds or even thousands more that were unseen.

“With this removal, we're going to see some significant improvements with the ecosystem down there,” said Yakama Klickitat Fisheries Program Manager, Joe Blodgett. “We are optimistic that the salmon populations will also respond favorably and be able to access the Yakima River as adults and be able to migrate out as smolts to the Columbia River more safely.”



A 2024 photo of dead adult sockeye salmon floating in the Yakima River Delta. Photo by Toby Kock, U.S. Geological Survey.

Yakama Nation Begins Assessments

Starting in 2012, Mid-Columbia Fisheries contracted the Yakama Nation (YN) to conduct a present/absence (P/A) fish assessment down at the delta to look at the type of fish species that were utilizing the area.

Yakama Nation Fisheries took it a step further and classified three water habitat areas, on the first being the west side of the causeway, which is a back water portion of Yakima River currently non-flowing due to the causeway. This area picks up heavy amounts of sediment coming out of the Yakima River, as well as contributes to elevated water temperatures.

“So, when you get into spring, summer or even early fall, the water heats up a lot, ranging in temperatures from 40-85 degrees,” said YN Fisheries Lower River Coordinator, Michael Porter.

This range of water temperature is lethal for salmon and steelhead.

“At that point, you only have warm water fish thriving in that area, which are all introduced fish species,” continued Porter. “And now what we see in that area are a lot of smallmouth bass, largemouth bass, channel catfish, brown bullhead, and various other types of smaller warm water fish.”

The second water habitat area is adjacent to the first (about a half a mile north) and has flowing water. It was also surveyed for fish species and water temperatures.

And finally, the third water habitat area that was classified was located on the east side of the causeway. This area is primarily Columbia River water and has significantly cooler water temperatures. It also doesn't have the sediment build up and cloudy water turbidity (a measure of water clarity) like the Yakima River.

Once these three water habitat areas were established, they were monitored seasonally - fall, winter, spring, summer - to observe fish species occupancy across the range of seasonal water temperatures.

A statistical analysis was performed to show the differences between the west side of the causeway compared to these other two areas - the northern free flowing Yakima River water, to the stagnant Columbia River water east of the causeway and it revealed the presence of a massive predator fish population.

“We found that the predator fish on the east side of the causeway, in the hot backwater Yakima River area, the fish are using this area across the whole year - they're not leaving,” said Porter. “The juveniles are rearing there and we could catch up to 3000 smallmouth bass in a day, and most of them would be juveniles, meaning that they're actually using that backwater area to increase their population numbers.”

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Walla Walla District initially proposed a partial removal of the causeway, but after they received the YN data findings, the science convinced the move toward a full removal alternative.

“Besides the major difference of water temperature from the east side of the Columbia River water to the Yakima River water, you also have this huge star grass problem that is growing amazingly out-of-control,” said Porter. “Star grass is a native aqua plant and the reason it's been growing so extreme is because of the significant loss of water flow in the area due to dams and infrastructure.”

Normally star grass is uprooted and displaced year to year by high flow events and floods. This is how it was controlled naturally.

Star grass normally grows mainly along the sides of the rivers channels and would stabilize the banks. It is also important for some aquatic species, such as ducks, to forage.

“But the way that it is now, with the river being so stagnant due to the causeway, the star grass is taking advantage of the whole entire area,” said Blodgett.



An aerial view of Bateman Island during the Dec. 2025 severe high river flows. The causeway can be seen on the upper portion of the image. Photo by Yakama Nation Fisheries Lower River Project Manager Lead, Tom Elliot.

The Collaboration

In 2016, the current stakeholder partners joined forces to further develop a workable plan to address these issues for fisheries and natural resources, while maintaining and/or improving recreational opportunities

The Yakima Delta Leadership Team, consisting of USACE and partner organization personnel, highlighted the strong collaboration between the various stakeholders involved in the project. These partnerships have been crucial in navigating the complexities of the project and ensuring its success.

The USACE in partnership with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), the Yakama Nation, the Washington Department of Ecology, and the Mid-Columbia Fisheries Enhancement Group awarded a \$1.2 million construction contract to PIPKIN INC. for the Bateman Island Causeway removal project.

“We are so excited to be a part of the restoration of the Yakima River Delta. As commander of the Walla Walla District, I am proud to be part of this effort, returning the area to its natural state,” said Lt. Col. Kathryn Werback. “The island causeway blocks the river's course, which negatively impacts critical habitat for culturally significant fish. Today, we begin reversing that harm through a restoration effort made

possible by our strong partnerships with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Yakama Nation, and Mid-Columbia Fisheries.”

“This is a long-term collaborative effort, working together to get the process completed, working to get the permitting required and working to also educate everybody, especially the local people near the island who are going to see changes in their area,” said Joe Blodgett, who is also a spokesperson for the Integrated Plan. “It is incredibly rewarding to see the years of collaboration come to fruition — the Yakama Nation taking the lead on fisheries, the Army Corps contracting out the excavation work, and WDFW co-managers supporting the coordination with Mid-Columbia Fisheries.”

Starting at the island, the causeway will be removed to water level to establish stable foundation, followed by removing underwater portion of the causeway. As the causeway is removed, a silt curtain will be rolled back to allow the open area to flow freely.

“The removal of the causeway has been a long time coming,” said Yakama Nation Tribal Council Chairman, Gerald Lewis. “The Yakama Nation has worked very hard on behalf of the Yakima River and all of the water that flows down. With the removal of the causeway, it will open up the flow of the Yakima River and allow the fish to find exactly where they need to go. Not only the sockeye but the spring chinook salmon that travel up there to spawn and go up to our fish hatchery.”

What’s Next?

Yakama Nation fisheries will continue to monitor the salmon and invasive fish species, as well as the vegetation, with an overarching goal of “making it like it was.”

Blodgett explained, “this means we need to get that river acting like a river. And it doesn't stop at Bateman - we're going to continue to work up the Yakima River and look at all these systems with all the areas that are critical to improving fish survival as they migrate out of the system.”

By removing this causeway, there will be an increase of water flow around the island which will see a significant increase in sediment removal, allowing for a deeper channel for fish to go through which salmon adults will utilize.

“I am hopeful that by February, we will have the opportunity to see the river restored to its natural state,” said Phil Rigdon, YN Department of Natural Resources superintendent. “That’s the exciting part—those things that we value as native people. I want to thank my staff, but also my leaders, who have stayed consistent the whole time, fighting for what’s right, fighting for what we need to take care of. It’s about the spirit of where our people, our history and our way of life have always been tied to the river, the fish, and our connection to the Coast.”

USACE’s efforts are guided by the Continuing Authorities Program, Section 1135 authority, under the Water Resources Development Act, which mandates addressing degraded ecological conditions in areas under their control. The causeway removal is part of the Yakima Basin Integrated Plan, a coalition of local, state, and federal agencies, the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, and non-governmental environmental organizations that are collaborating on projects to benefit farms, fish, and communities in the Yakima River Basin.

“I would like to thank everyone involved in their efforts to make this happen,” concluded Chairman Lewis. “And thank you to the Richland community for trusting in these efforts and I am excited for everyone to see the progress that will take place when the river repairs itself.”

By Michael-David A. Bushman, Yakama Nation Fisheries Public Relations Specialist