The Dalles navigation lock replaces upstream gate
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Cover photo: by Karim Delgado, Public Affairs Specialist, A District engineer supervises contractors as they load the Dalles’ new upstream gate onto a barge ahead of its voyage to the navigation lock for installation.

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Commander: Col. Jose L. Aguilar
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Two Way Communication is Key to Nurturing a “Great Place to Work”

The District’s senior leaders, Suzanne and I would like to wish you a Happy New Year. 2016 was a banner year and we are postured for another awesome year in service to our nation. To our retirees, thank you for your continued support.

One of the most important things we do as a society is communicate. But communication does not just happen, and a lot of us don’t always get it right. Communication takes a tremendous amount of effort to ensure we are conveying the right message, to the right people and at the right time.

At its most basic, communication has three components: sender, receiver and medium. A breakdown in any of these will cause communication to fail. Effective communication requires a good heart from the participants – a heart with character grounded by our Army Values: competent and confident, committed to our ideals and mission, and a willing to go the extra mile to build and nurture a culture which brings out the best in all of us.

Most of us are familiar with the three parts of the communication cycle, but here is my take on it:

• Sender: it takes a lot of effort to actually say what we mean. Not only is it difficult to pick the correct words but timing, tone and non-verbals are tremendously important. And, you don’t actually have to say anything to send a message. Your actions, or lack thereof, communicate as well.
• Medium: how, and through what devices we send a message (email, radio, the air/distance between sender and receiver) is the medium. If you chose the wrong method to communicate, your intended message may not get through.
• Receiver: probably the most important part of the three, because if the receiver doesn’t receive the message than the communication didn’t happen. Listening is an art, and the receiver needs to be in active receive mode. If you are preparing to respond while also listening to what is being said (and we all do it) or are exposed to other distractions, it will make it very hard to clearly understand the incoming message.

I am constantly looking for opportunities to communicate with each of you. Through formal engagements, like the town halls or structured project visits, or informal meetings in the hallway, the elevator or walking around a construction project or dredge, I am always excited to meet and talk with each of you. The feedback I receive is outstanding and very educational, and it allows me to make better decisions for our District. The bottom line is this: Please help keep the lines communication open.

I will continue to try to be a good listener and will attempt to ensure the medium contributes to the clarity of the message.

One way you communicate to your leadership is through surveys, and I know these surveys are time-consuming and a distraction from other important work, repetitive in the questions asked and, perhaps, just plain annoying. Let me assure you, however, that I find them to be an important tool to further validate what I hear (or don’t hear) from each of you as I make my rounds about the District. I want to thank you for taking the time to complete them.

During the October Town Hall, I shared some of the results from OPM’s 2016 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey and subsequently had them posted to our intranet homepage. If you haven’t reviewed them, please take a few moments to do so. While these results are consistent with those from other surveys, their message is no less important.

This is information that I – and all senior leaders in the District – work with, either to maintain or improve our work environment. Some things we can address immediately and others will take time. Also, there are things we cannot discuss publically (such as discipline) or are mostly outside our control (such as pay for performance). This makes it difficult for leaders to demonstrate the steps we are taking to address your concerns. The FEVS Survey is generally at the macro-level and is used to help rank us with other federal agencies regarding job satisfaction.

We now have the results from the most recent District Command Climate Survey. This survey is more on the micro-level and helps your leadership focus, prioritize and make strategic decisions that affect you on a more personal level. For example: based on your previous comments we have launched an effort to build a District knowledge management program.

I trust I did not need to make a case on the importance of candid, two-way communication for the health of our team and the ability to accomplish our mission. I share these thoughts not because I am an expert, but because I have made my own share of communication mistakes. But that is not the point; honest and effective communication builds trust. Trust builds relationships. And relationships help us work together to meet our mutual goals. To that end, I will endeavor to keep trying to improve and ask for your constant feedback on how I can get better. Happy New Year Portland District.

Competence follows Character.

Col. Jose Aguilar

61st Colonel of the District
A complex system creates communication challenges

By Tom Conning, Public Affairs Office

Typhoon Songda

As the remnants of Typhoon Songda were striking the Northwest, Oct. 16, 2016, dropping more than an inch of rain in 48 hours, a system of 13 dams and reservoirs in the Willamette Valley was at work, mitigating some risks that would normally come from that type of storm. The dams are part of a complex system designed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Portland District, to help manage flood risks for downstream populations.

“These storm systems have the potential to create a lot of havoc for Willamette Valley residents,” said Erik Petersen, Willamette Valley Project operations manager. “Maintaining good communications internally and with external partners, is critical. Safety is our top priority for employees and residents in the valley and we take these ‘atmospheric rivers’ very seriously,” he said. “One difficulty is communicating the complexity of our project to local residents and sometimes even our own employees.”
A complex system
Recently, Petersen brought together a motley crew of employees from the Portland and Walla Walla districts and the Bureau of Reclamation for a tour, to explain the complexity of the Willamette Valley Project. Sydney Foster, Lookout Point Dam electrical engineer, is a new Portland District employee who spent the two-and-a-half day tour learning about many of the sites he will be supporting.

“Being new to the Willamette Valley, the tour provided me a big picture of the Valley’s mission and some zoom-ins of specific mission areas and partners,” Foster said. “I was impressed by how the system was setup to address competing goals,” he continued. “The idea of a reregulation dam is new to me and seems a brilliant solution to allow power generation flexibility in a vastly flood risk management environment.”

Outside agency flavor
Three members of the Bureau of Reclamation’s Klamath Falls office visited the project at the request of Petersen. The Corps and Bureau have very different missions but Petersen invited them for their perspective.

“There are a lot of differences between our two organizations, but we both manage water resources infrastructure and balance multiple competing demands,” explained Petersen. “The hope was to share our operational methodology with each other and hopefully gain some insight about how we could improve our organizations,” he said. “I think we did that.”

The visit was much more than discussions about the dams, as the group visited fish facilities and recreation sites. However, each Willamette Valley Project dam contributes to the water resource management system, providing flood risk management, power generation, water quality improvement, irrigation, fish and wildlife habitat and recreation.

Sydney Foster (second from right), Lookout Point Dam electrical engineer, tours Lookout Point Dam, Oct. 6, 2016. “The idea of a reregulation dam is new to me and seems a brilliant solution to allow power generation flexibility in a vastly flood risk management environment,” said Foster.
The Portland District is reinvigorating its Speakers Bureau program. The program, which is managed by the Public Affairs Office, provides District employees a unique opportunity to help shape and change the public’s perception of the Corps, its missions and actions. It’s also an area of special emphasis for Col. Jose Aguilar, the Portland District commander.

““This is a tremendous opportunity to educate the public about who we are and what we do,” Aguilar explained. “I’ve participated in many public speaking events supporting many different commands and I find it is an exhilarating, gratifying and enlightening experience.”

Speakers Bureau engagements can range from middle school presentations to talking to civic groups. Larry Suppan, Hydroelectric Design Center electrical engineer, recently spoke to more than 30 8th grade students about renewable energy. He described the event as a way to pass on the love of engineering to the next generation.

“My dad, brother and sister have taught for many years. We all love to see the light go on in the eyes of the student,” said Suppan. “The 8th graders were engaged in the discussion and freely participated. The interactive nature of the talk helped in drawing the kids out,” he said. “Promoting the Corps and educating the next generation is how we grow and attract the best engineers.”

Employees who are interested in becoming a volunteer speaker can contact Tom Conning in the Public Affairs Office or visit the District’s intranet homepage and click on the ‘Become a Volunteer Speaker!’ link at the bottom of the page. 

“I encourage all staff to consider speaking on behalf of the District. We have the best and brightest minds working here – it is our duty to share that with the community we serve in order to encourage dialogue and have a more informed public on topics that are important to our profession.” —Col. Jose Aguilar, Portland District Commander
Our crew at the The Dalles Lock and Dam is working day and night to replace the upstream gate of the navigation lock. We cut the current gate into three sections to make removal easier, as altogether it weighs 90 tons – as much as 18 monster trucks.

All navigation locks on the lower Columbia and Snake rivers have been placed out of service from Dec. 12 through March 20. The extended outage is a coordinated effort between Portland and Walla Walla districts, as well as commercial river users. Our goal is to accomplish critical lock repairs during a jointly scheduled time frame to minimize the impacts of these closures.
You know Lt. Col. Cullen Jones is the Portland District deputy commander and might also know he is a professional engineer with a master’s degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. What you probably don’t know is he is also an artist and the definition of a “Renaissance man.”

Jones was inspired to become an Army engineer after he read “The Path Between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal,” 1870–1914 by David McCullough, which he said is “An amazing story of one of humanity’s greatest engineering triumphs.”

While attending the United States Military Academy at West Point, and on his way to becoming the Army engineer he once dreamed about, Jones received another inspiration.

“As a cadet, one of my teachers and eventually one of my mentors, (retired Brig.) Gen. Steve Ressler is a phenomenal pen-and-ink artist. It was inspiring to see a consummate engineer who was also a great artist and superb craftsmen,” Jones said. “He is the epitome of a renaissance man and I thought, ‘An engineer officer who’s teaching at West Point who’s also an artist... I should try that, too.’”

After assignments in Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan and multiple locations in the United States, Jones returned to West Point as an assistant professor for the Design of Reinforced Concrete and Masonry Structures class.

“We taught in five colors of chalk and I had an extra chalkboard in my office, so I took a famous painting and replaced the subjects with students and instructors,” Jones recounted. “Gen. Ressler who was now the department head, said ‘I hope you know you’ll be doing one of those every two weeks now.’”

Jones rewarded his students that did well with high-quality photographic prints of his chalkboard drawings. The prints were so popular, his students collected and traded them like baseball cards.

Jones is still giving his artwork away as gifts for a job well-done. Instead of chalk drawings, he now gives away numbered reproductions of the pen-and-ink drawings he creates with every career move.

“I try to commemorate each of my assignments with something. I did one for my brigade and the surveyor was based on my time during my fellowship,” Jones said.

Jones is currently taking on his most challenging commemorative work yet.

“There’s this great iconic Portland District picture of one of the turbines at Bonneville Dam surrounded by workers that I’m working on,” Jones said. “It’s a massive and complex photograph that I’m trying to boil down to its essence to provide enjoyment to others.”

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary definition of “Renaissance man” is “a person who has wide interests and is expert in several areas.”

Jones, who draws to, “exercise the other side of my brain,” epitomizes the definition.
Pen and ink drawings that Lt. Col. Jones created to commemorate different assignments in his career.

Chalkboard drawings that Lt. Col. Jones created for the Design of Reinforced Concrete and Masonry Structures class as an assistant professor at the United States Military Academy at West Point.
It takes a really big plan to guarantee safe, deep-draft navigation of the 43-foot Columbia River federal navigation channel for 20 years. The plan needs to be extensive enough to handle up to 8 million cubic yards of material dredged annually along 102 miles of the river. Where do you start?

“We think of this plan as a working operations manual that has both details and flexibility. This approach allows us to optimize channel maintenance and make changes along the way to increase its reliability,” explains Jessica Stokke, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ Channels and Harbors project manager in the Portland District and lead of the Project Delivery Team.

Efforts to develop the Lower Columbia River Channel Maintenance Plan, by 2019 are now underway. In the end, the Corps, other agencies and hundreds of stakeholders who participate in maintenance and benefit from the work will have an outline of what needs to be done – and a plan for doing it well—through 2039.

Portland District’s original mission – to eliminate impediments to navigation on the Pacific Northwest’s rivers and the task of channel maintenance – dates back to 1871. Today, the Lower Columbia River federal navigation channel extends 103 miles upstream from the Mouth of the Columbia River to Vancouver, Washington. The current plan calls for maintaining the navigation channel to its previously authorized depth of 40 feet but the Corps has since deepened the channel to 43 feet.

“The Port of Portland, along with other Columbia River ports, depends on maintenance dredging to support our trade gateway,” states Bill Wyatt, executive director for the Port of Portland. “Maintaining the river channel at its authorized depth and width is essential to sustaining the billions of dollars of commerce that flow through the Columbia River.”

Maintenance plans must support long-term stewardship of the natural resources of the Columbia River, consider ways to reduce dredging requirements and determine the best plan for placing material dredged from the channel
at appropriate sites. Stokke explains that a key success for the mandated plan will come with the identification of these placement sites. Many sites used today are reaching capacity, the official plan for these sites expires in 2018 and a new plan must be in place by Jan. 1, 2019.

Possible placement locations are based on the site’s potential capacity, distance from the actual dredging location and how much it costs to transport and place material. Areas must be identified, evaluated and approved by the appropriate federal and state agencies and worked through a real estate process to ensure approvals and permits.

The ports of Longview, Kalama, Woodland and Vancouver in Washington and the Port of Portland are participating in the planning project. One of their key roles includes helping the Corps identify placement sites and securing upland properties that best support the Corps’ navigation mission. Cost effectiveness is also an important consideration. “If approved, the areas will be added to the Corps’ list of available sites; although, it could be a decade or more until these are used,” says Stokke.

The Corps will seek input on criteria for evaluating and comparing alternatives that help meet the Plan’s goals from affected federal, state and local agencies, Native American Tribes and stakeholders. The Corps will evaluate the environmental, social and economic impacts of the alternatives under the National Environmental Policy Act through an Environmental Impact Statement.

The best options, based on the impacts analysis and public input, will then be organized into a preferred maintenance plan and draft EIS for public review and comment. This planning effort will answer: Is it possible to extend the space available at existing material placement sites? Can the Corps reduce dredging requirements? Can dredged material be used for ecosystem restoration? And can all of this be done while considering the natural resources of the Columbia River?

More detailed information about this project, scoping workshop dates and other opportunities to provide comments will be available at www.nwp.usace.army.mil/Missions/Navigation.

Dredged material from the federal navigation channel is placed at a shoreline site along the Columbia River. This placement assists in habitat creation and helps keep clean sand in the river but outside of the channel.
Corps investigates
Valley dams

By Michelle Helms, Public Affairs Office

Crews mobilized to Hills Creek and Lookout Point dams in October as the Portland District began field investigations at some of its dams. The investigations, one part of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ Issue Evaluation Studies, will give the District information to better understand conditions within the dams and in their foundations.

“Our highest priority is ensuring that Corps’ dams are fully able to function as they are intended to,” said Matt Craig, Portland District Dam Safety Program manager. “The data from these studies will provide more information on the engineering characteristics of the dams and foundation materials.”

The field investigation work will begin at Cougar Dam soon. The field investigation work varies by project, and includes:

• drilling bore holes and excavating test pits
• detailed logging of geotechnical samples
• geophysical testing
• installing instrumentation in select areas to measure water levels and movements within the dam
• lab testing on the samples to improve understanding of how these materials perform under various conditions

“The information from these field investigations will improve our understanding of the risk at these dams and how it compares to current dam safety standards,” said Craig.

The Portland District, as part of its Dam Safety program, monitors the condition and performance of several structures within the Columbia, Willamette and Rogue river basins, including:

• 20 dams
• five navigation locks
• 13 hydropower plants

The dams’ ages range from nearly 80 years old (Bonneville Lock and Dam, completed in 1938) to less than 30 years old (Mount St. Helens Sediment Retention Structure, built in 1989). All were well-designed, built to the safety standards of their day and are functioning as intended. As years go by technology changes, as does our understanding of elements of the natural world and the risks they pose to manmade structures.

“Our understanding of the potential for earthquakes due to the presence of the Cascadia Subduction Zone is pretty recent,” said Craig. “Studies such as the IES provide an opportunity to evaluate the dams using that improved understanding and potentially identify a need to gain additional information to evaluate risk.”

Photos by Tom Conning, Public Affairs Office
Through the IES process, the Corps gets better insight on how well the dams will perform under a variety of conditions including heavy rain, storms and seismic activity.

Study results are expected in Fiscal Year 2019. At that time, the Corps will decide if the risk associated with the potential issues meets dam safety standards, or if the District needs to move into the next phase of risk evaluation – a Dam Safety Modification Study, which is performed to determine what modifications to the dam should be made to lower risk.

Jeff Schwindaman, geologist, Brandon Betz, geotechnical engineer, and Joseph Manning, geologist, dig a test pit at Hills Creek Dam, Nov. 15, 2016. Samples taken from the test pits will be tested in labs to better understand how the materials would perform under various conditions such as extreme weather and seismic activity. The field investigation work varies by project, and includes drilling and excavating test pits, logging soil and material samples, and installing instrumentation to measure water levels and movements within the dam.

An Issue Evaluation Study is completed in phases, which include:

1. Data gathering phase: field investigation, regional hydrologic analysis, regional potential seismic hazard analysis, advanced structural analysis, etc.
2. Evaluation phase: consequence modeling and risk elicitation
3. Documentation and review phase
4. Decision-making phase: is further evaluation needed, do interim risk reduction measures need to be taken and/or do modifications need to be made?

The studies are part of the Corps’ national Dam Safety Program, which includes periodic inspections and risk assessments, Emergency Action Plan exercises, seismic and hydrologic studies.

For more information about the Program, visit http://www.usace.army.mil/Missions/CivilWorks/DamSafetyProgram.aspx

One of a kind history

Portland District has a facility like none other in the Pacific Northwest. Since 1903, the U.S. Government Moorings has supported the Corps’ dredging and navigation mission to maintain Pacific Northwest waterways. More than 100 years later, the work done at the Moorings maintains the dredges that keep Oregon’s small coastal harbors connected to the Pacific Ocean and more than $20 billion in commerce moving on the Columbia River each year.

Learn more about how the Moorings impacted the settlement and economic development of Oregon and the region. Watch “The U.S. Government Moorings, Portland, Oregon: Looking back, moving forward” on the Portland Corps YouTube channel, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qf9FA-Kba6o
PORTLAND, Oregon – More than 40 employees and volunteers with Portland District and the Multnomah County Drainage District participated in flood-fighting team training at the MCDD office and along the Columbia River Corridor Nov. 30.

The practical training exercise required both agencies to work together seamlessly in a unified command organization responding to a simulated major flood event.

“We approached the simulated flood fight as one team, making joint decisions and erasing organizational boundaries as much as possible,” said Paul Jewell, readiness training manager with the Portland District. Such training helps improve coordination and cooperation so the two organizations will be better prepared to serve in mutual response in the event of an actual emergency, according to Jewell.

Most of the training participants were organized into four teams, each comprised of both Corps and drainage district employees, which were then dispatched to various levees to find and solve problems similar to those that would occur during an actual flood. Training signs posted at multiple locations across the levee system described a myriad of emergency response scenarios. Teams worked together to find solutions to these problems before radioing the mock command post at the MCDD office with findings and requests for material or technical assistance.

Those participants who were assigned to the command post, meanwhile, managed resources and communicated response efforts with impacted stakeholders and the public. The training exercise was intended to mirror the conditions and challenges of a real interagency flood-fighting effort.

“As the scenario for the training very closely paralleled the Flood of ‘96, most of the issues we faced already happened and can happen again,” said Jewell, who also serves as the flood control and coastal emergencies program manager for the Portland District.

The Great Flood of 1996 was the culmination of record-breaking rain, sudden warm temperatures and above-average snowpack, which together brought unexpected and severe flooding throughout northern Oregon. River levels were comparable to those of the historic flood of 1964, the worst flood experienced by the region since the levee systems were first built. Corps employees worked day and night as part of the response effort, providing technical
Charles Chrisp and Jeff Ballantine measure a levee embankment during a flood-fighting team training exercise in Portland, Oregon, Nov. 30. Participants were required to find solutions to various emergency scenarios indicated by signs posted along the levee system. Chrisp is a utility worker with Multnomah County Drainage District. Ballantine is a hydraulic engineer with Portland District.

The flood-fighting team training is an annual exercise the Corps performs with numerous respective levee system sponsors ahead of flood season.

The 1996 flood caused massive road closures and power outages throughout MCDD’s operational area, which includes 27 miles of levees, 45 miles of ditches and sloughs and 13 pump stations along the Columbia River Corridor. The Portland International Airport, which is protected by MCDD’s levee system, recorded seven inches of rain over four days, while water levels reached within two inches of the electrical panel in the Sandy Pump Station. Though MCDD’s system performed well, the flood revealed a need for greater collaboration and cooperation, according to Angela Carkner, Emergency Planning Project Manager with MCDD.

This renewed emphasis on teamwork mirrors the Corps’ emergency response mission, which prioritizes readiness training with state and local governments, volunteer organizations and the private sector to ensure response efforts are coordinated and effective. As such, the Corps’ ability to provide assistance during response and recovery missions depends on its ability to foster strong relationships with its partners, according to Col. Jose L. Aguilar, Commander and District Engineer of Portland District.

“It’s really about relationships and understanding each other. We have different organizational cultures but a positive relationship can overcome any type of problem,” Aguilar said. “If the water comes up as it did in ‘96, these are the people who will be there. Training like this allows us to sharpen the blade and ensure that our technical expertise always stays up to speed.”

The Corps and Multnomah County Drainage District employees pose for a team photo during a flood-fighting team training exercise held at the MDCC office and along the Columbia River Corridor in Portland, Oregon, on Nov. 30.
Afternoon ‘gut-punch’ stirs defensive response

By Erik Peterson, Willamette Valley Project

We were finishing up our weekly leadership team meeting when the phone call came in. Ugh – like a punch to the gut, I was notified that there had been an accident on Highway 20, east of Foster Dam, near Sweet Home, Oregon. It involved two of our staff, one of our vehicles and another vehicle. The preliminary indication was that it was a head-on collision, and that our folks were waiting for the Oregon State Patrol and a tow truck to arrive. My stomach knotted up. I wanted to ensure that our folks remained safe and were taken care of. We made a call to someone at Foster to head that direction and get them back to the office and their vehicles at Fern Ridge, about 70 miles away. Working through their supervisor, I ensured their commitment to seek medical attention, and I agreed to meet them at the hospital later that evening.

When our folks got back into cell phone range, I learned that the employee who was driving the government vehicle reacted quickly and evasively to the oncoming vehicle drifting into their lane. The employee’s attention allowed for a diversion towards the shoulder, and the occupants experienced a substantial, but glancing blow. Had the reaction been a split-second later, the accident would have been a full, head-on collision at highway speeds. Police cited the other driver for inattentive driving. I’m thankful that our employee was driving attentively and defensively. Perhaps those actions were life-saving. Certainly, the defensive-driving prevented a much more serious outcome.

I met them at the hospital, arriving shortly before they did. Both were visibly shaken up. One seemed a little fuzzy, which concerned me. I waited with them in the ER waiting room and fortunately both checked out reasonably OK, and were treated and released. Both felt the trauma of the accident for the next couple of weeks.

We operate in a risk-filled environment. From hazardous energy, to confined spaces, to potential exposure to harsh materials – some of the hazards our employees face are very obvious, and they are always considered and usually very well-managed before we undertake work. Others are hazards we sometimes take for granted. In our matrixed operating environment, Willamette Valley employees drive between 700,000 - 800,000 miles annually as part of their work. Certainly this ‘windshield time’ is a real and constant threat that if unmanaged, can result in disastrous consequences. I often think about the exposure we have, and how strongly I want to ensure we have a work culture where people can manage risk appropriately and have the greatest chance possible to go home safely to their love ones every day. As a manager, here’s what I think about, and would like to reinforce:

• Drive defensively – to do this, we need to be well-rested, focused and cognizant of the risks of being on the road.
• Plan ahead, to give ourselves time to manage weather, traffic and detours and still be on time.
• Ride with a buddy when we can – having someone in the car with us helps us stay more engaged and present, and facilitates accident avoidance.
• Condition is important – make sure the vehicle we’re using is safe – lights, brakes, wipers, tires, fluids. All are essential for safe operation.
• Rules - part of defensive driving is abiding by traffic laws. This is pretty obvious, but, not always adhered to – me included. Five-over is not good. We’re compensated to do our jobs and allowed time to do them.
• Attention – let our attention be on the road, not on reading, listening to a teleconference or texting on a phone.
• Give ourselves an out - scan in front and all around and constantly contemplate contingencies as you drive.

I’m so thankful that our employees were not hurt more severely. I’m thankful that I don’t get calls like I did on Oct. 3, more frequently. I’m reminded of my responsibility to set the example for driving defensively. If we can use this incident to refresh our recognition of the hazard, then some good has come from it. Please consider the risks when you drive, and get home safely, every day.