

Tribal Lands: Opportunities Exist to Improve Conditions of Columbia River Fishing Access Sites

GAO-26-108201 [Accessible Version]

Q&A

Report to Congressional Committees

June 29, 2026

Why This Matters

The four Columbia River Treaty Tribes signed treaties with the United States in 1855 that reserved the right to fish at usual and accustomed places, including along the Columbia River in the Pacific Northwest. However, beginning in the late 1930s, the Tribes' ability to exercise their treaty rights has been hindered by federal construction of dams in the Columbia River Basin that submerged traditional tribal fishing sites. To help mitigate the dams' impact on the Tribes' treaty fishing rights, the federal government acquired lands for the creation of fishing access sites beginning in 1942.

Over several decades, deferred maintenance and heavy use have caused significant wear and tear on the sites' infrastructure, leading to sanitation and safety issues. Since the 1960s, the four Columbia River Treaty Tribes have expressed concerns about federal construction and maintenance of the sites. These concerns included health hazards, impure water systems, lack of sanitation facilities, improperly constructed sheds, failure to remove old buildings, and failure to clean up the sites.

The 2019 Columbia River In-Lieu and Treaty Fishing Access Sites Improvement Act authorized \$11 million in appropriations from fiscal year 2020 through 2025 for the Department of the Interior to make improvements to the sanitation and safety conditions at these fishing access sites. It also includes a provision for GAO to evaluate whether Interior's actions pursuant to the law have improved sanitation and safety conditions at these sites. (Pub. L. No. 116-99, § 3, 133 Stat. 3254, 3255 (2019)). This report examines Interior's efforts to identify and assess sanitary and safety conditions, consult with the Tribes and coordinate with other entities, improve conditions at the sites, and manage future needs.

Key Takeaways

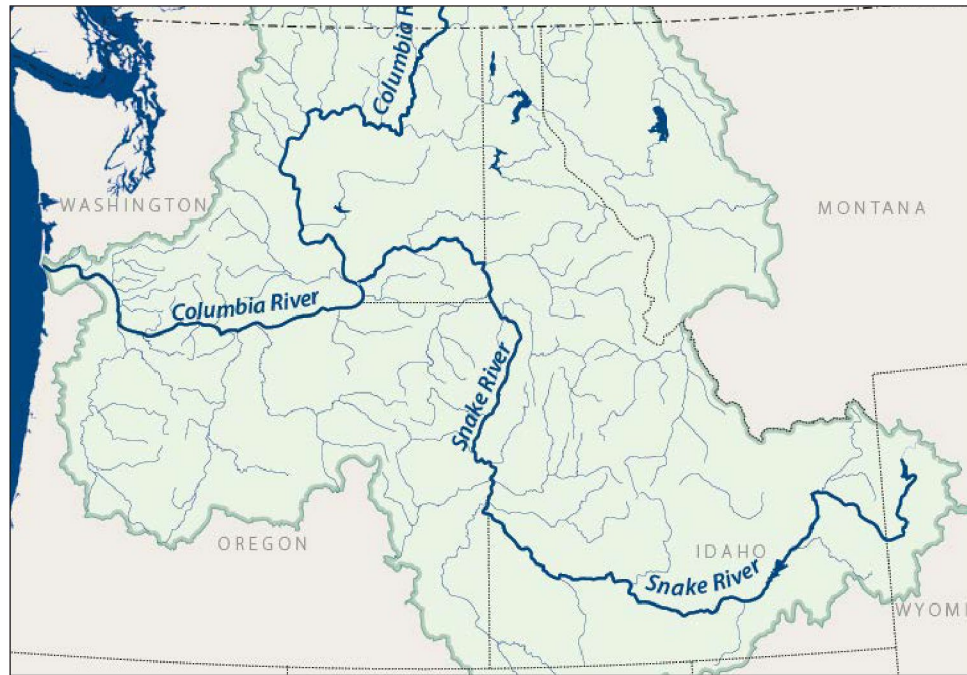
- A 2022 assessment identified urgent issues across fishing access sites, including dilapidated restrooms, outdated fish-cleaning stations, and the accumulation of abandoned property, which made sites unsafe for tribal members.
- As of February 2026, Interior had spent \$17.3 million on site assessments, project designs, and construction since fiscal year 2020. Interior used Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act appropriations for the construction of water sanitation and other facilities.

- Interior faces challenges completing additional improvements at the sites it administers due to incomplete data in its facilities management system, a funding formula for operations and maintenance (O&M) that does not account for all property at each site, and unclear policy and guidance that have slowed agency efforts to improve conditions at the sites.
- We recommend that Interior (1) update incomplete information for fishing access sites in its facilities management system to inform future resource allocation decisions; (2) update its O&M funding formula to ensure that all property at fishing access sites is eligible to receive funding; and (3) update policies and develop guidance to improve communication, clarify roles, and leverage resources.

What is the historical and cultural significance of the Columbia River for area Tribes?

Historically, the Columbia River has been a cornerstone of area Tribes' cultural and economic traditions, with fishing as a key element. Natural waterfalls on the river and its tributaries, where salmon were easier to harvest, were cornerstones to Tribes' cultural traditions, serving as meeting places and centers for trade, according to a 2024 Interior report.¹ According to the Interior report, Tribes in the Columbia River Basin have stewarded the Basin's natural resources for many generations. Although the Tribes migrated seasonally across their aboriginal territories, many generations lived, thrived, and were buried on the banks of the river and its tributaries located in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and into Canada (see fig. 1). Four Tribes—the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon, and the Nez Perce Tribe—signed treaties with the United States government in 1855 that reserved on- and off-reservation fishing rights along the Columbia River.²

Figure 1: Map of the Columbia River Basin



Source: Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (CRITFC). | GAO-26-108201

How did the construction and operation of federal dams along the Columbia River affect Tribes?

The construction and operation of federal dams and resulting activities altered Tribes' cultural and economic use of the Columbia River. According to Interior and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the construction and operation of federal dams since 1933—along with commercial activities and other effects from settlement—altered the natural flow of the river, inundated hundreds of thousands of acres of land, and affected ecosystem functions, which disproportionately harmed Tribes.³ For example, Celilo Falls drew tribal fishers from throughout the Pacific Northwest to fish, trade, and socialize, until it was inundated following the completion of the Dalles Dam in 1957 (see fig. 2).

Figure 2: Celilo Falls Circa 1952, Before the Inundation by the Construction of the Dalles Dam



Source: Raymond Matheny. | GAO-26-108201

Fishing access sites built after federal dams were to replace fishing grounds destroyed by the dams or provide access to treaty fishing grounds. According to a 2024 Interior report, the sites were inadequately built and resulted in substandard and unsanitary conditions during the fishing seasons.⁴ In addition, the report found that many of the cumulative impacts of federal dams remain unmitigated, and Tribes continue to bear a disproportionate burden of the harm caused. For example, the dams also flooded tribal families' homes and other structures that were not rebuilt as had been discussed, according to Interior and Corps reports.⁵ Because tribal families' homes and other structures had existed next to the river prior to the dams, some tribal citizens returned to use fishing access sites in ways they had previously.

According to the Interior report and a plan by the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (CRITFC), tribal leaders have connected persistent housing insecurity and related overcrowding challenges at sites to the initial displacement of people and flooding of homes.⁶ Figure 3 discusses the use of Columbia River fishing access sites to mitigate housing insecurity.

Figure 3: Columbia River Fishing Access Site Used to Mitigate Housing Insecurity

Prior to the completion of the Bonneville Dam in 1938, tribal members had homes and other structures on the land where they fished and that was later submerged by the dam, according to a report by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps). The Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) identified more than 37 such places. According to a BIA report, it was clear the Corps would replace structures and homes submerged by waters held by the dam if money was available for such construction, but it was unclear whether those planned homes would be intended for permanent or semi-permanent use. However, in 1953 the Corps decided not to replace the homes. Interior issued regulations in 1967 allowing dwelling structures at the fishing access sites acquired pursuant to the River and Harbor Act of 1945 in certain circumstances. However, in 1969, Interior revised the regulation to prohibit dwellings except for camping facilities, fish drying facilities, and fishing platforms. In 1990, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled year-round dwelling structures were allowed on the fishing access sites acquired under the 1945 Act because such structures had been on lands submerged by the Bonneville Dam.

Separately, in 1974, the Corps was authorized to relocate the City of North Bonneville, a non-tribal community of about 450 residents, downstream from a proposed Bonneville Dam powerhouse site as well as to acquire lands and convey them to individuals, businesses, and the town as necessary. The community received funds for infrastructure, facilities, utilities, and temporary housing while the new location was under construction, according to a Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (CRITFC) document.

Present-day tribal members affected by the Bonneville Dam continue to be impacted by the loss of their traditional villages, fishing sites, and homes, and are disproportionately affected by housing scarcity due to the loss of other tribal lands and rising home prices, according to a 2024 Interior report and a 2014 CRITFC plan. As a result of housing shortages, fishing access site users may camp at the fishing access sites year-round, utilize abandoned vehicles to store family items passed down over generations, and use existing infrastructure to construct makeshift shelters.



Example of makeshift shelter constructed from existing infrastructure (left); examples of campers, vehicles, and hoop nets left at a fishing access site (center and right).

Source: GAO images and summary of Corps, Interior, and CRITFC documents; Interior regulations, federal court decision, and federal law. | GAO-26-108201

How many Columbia River fishing access sites are there and what is the extent and nature of their use by Tribes?

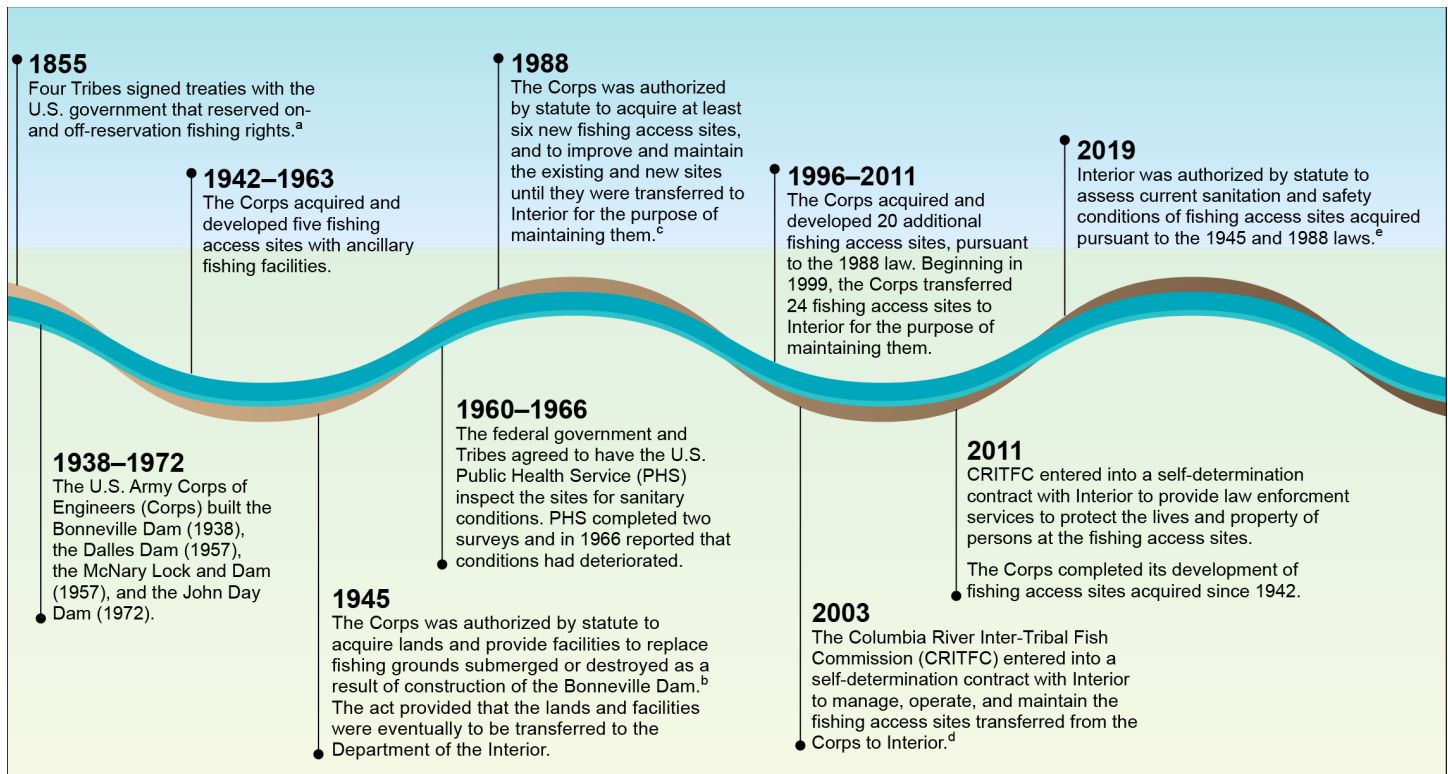
There are 31 Columbia River fishing access sites where Tribes can exercise their treaty fishing rights, and they have seen increasing use. From 1942 to 2010, the Corps acquired roughly 691 acres of land to develop 31 fishing access sites for the four Columbia River Treaty Tribes to replace tribal fishing grounds submerged or destroyed by dam construction.⁷ The Corps also constructed facilities and made other improvements to 27 of the 31 sites for seasonal use, including camping facilities, fish-cleaning stations, water and wastewater infrastructure, and docks. Most of the sites were set aside for the exclusive use of fishers from the four Columbia River Treaty Tribes.⁸

Tribal members use the sites for both subsistence and commercial fishing to exercise their treaty fishing rights. CRITFC representatives told us that, in the 1990s, the Corps designed the sites to accommodate approximately 25 daily users, but current needs have surpassed the initial estimates.⁹ Site usage and use duration has increased up to 400 percent over the past 10 years, and some sites can see up to 150 users per day, according to CRITFC representatives. Many sites are occupied and used on average for 18 to 20 weeks each year from mid-May through mid-October.

Who administers the Columbia River fishing access sites?

Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) administers 29 of the 31 Columbia River fishing access sites, with the remaining two sites administered by the Corps. Since 2003, BIA has relied on CRITFC for day-to-day management using funds from various sources. Figure 4 offers a timeline of relevant laws and key events related to administration of the Columbia River fishing access sites, including the construction of federal dams and the Corps' acquisition of lands and development of fishing access sites (for additional information see appendix I).

Figure 4: Timeline of Relevant Laws and Key Events Related to Columbia River Fishing Access Sites in Oregon and Washington



Source: GAO review and analysis of relevant treaties, laws, and Corps, CRITFC, and Interior documents. | GAO-26-108201

^aTreaty with the Nez Perces, art. III, 12 Stat. 957, 958 (1855); Treaty with the Walla-Walla, Cayuse, etc., art. I, 12 Stat. 945, 946 (1855) (Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Reservation); Treaty with the Yakamas, art. III, 12 Stat. 951, 953 (1855); Treaty with Indians in Middle Oregon, art. I, 12 Stat. 963, 964 (1855) (Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation).

^bRiver and Harbor Act of 1945, 59 Stat. 10, 22.

^cPub. L. No. 100-581, tit. IV, § 401(b), 102 Stat. 2938, 2944 (1988).

^dUnder the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975, as amended, tribal organizations and Tribes can enter into self-determination contracts with the Department of Interior to take over administration of certain federal programs previously administered on Tribes' behalf. Pub. L. No. 93-638, 88 Stat. 2203 (codified as amended at 25 U.S.C. §§ 5301-5423).

^ePub. L. No. 116-99, § 2(a), 133 Stat. 3254 (2019).

Federal law, and a 1995 agreement between the Corps and Interior, provided for the Corps to transfer to Interior (1) the fishing access sites for the purpose of maintenance and (2) the amount allocated for capitalized operations and maintenance (O&M) of the sites.¹⁰ Between 1996 and 2012, as 24 fishing access sites were transferred from the Corps to Interior, the Corps also transferred the amounts allocated for capitalized O&M of the sites. The amount transferred to BIA ultimately totaled approximately \$10.4 million. According to a 2012 Corps report, BIA intended to invest this transferred money into an interest-bearing account to support O&M at the sites for 50 years.¹¹ However, Interior did not have the authority to invest the funds to accrue interest and grow over time. Instead, Interior deposited the funds into the U.S. Treasury and used some of the funds, according to the Corps report.

In 2003, Interior entered into a self-determination contract—a contract that allows tribal organizations and Tribes to assume responsibility from Interior for managing a federal program’s day-to-day-operations—with CRITFC to manage, operate, and maintain the BIA-administered fishing access sites.¹² Under the contract, Interior provides funding for O&M activities and CRITFC conducts the work. Due to a significant backlog of deferred maintenance and heavier than expected use of the sites, CRITFC anticipated that the O&M funding—\$5.51 million—it initially received from Interior under the contract would be exhausted in approximately 13 to 15 years unless additional funding was provided, according to a 2012 Corps report.¹³

The 2019 Columbia River In-Lieu and Treaty Fishing Access Sites Improvement Act authorizes Interior to assess current sanitation and safety conditions on lands that were set aside as fishing access sites, including all permanent federal structures and improvements on those lands.¹⁴ The act also authorized appropriations of \$11 million, for the period of fiscal years 2020 through 2025, for Interior to make improvements to structures and infrastructure to improve sanitation and safety conditions of the fishing access sites.¹⁵ However, Interior did not receive a \$11 million line-item appropriation for such improvements. Congressional committee reports and joint explanatory statements accompanying Interior’s appropriations acts for fiscal years 2021 through 2024 directed Interior to spend between approximately \$1.3 and \$3.2 million annually to implement the act.¹⁶

What actions has Interior taken to assess the sanitation and safety conditions of Columbia River fishing access sites since 2020?

Interior contracted with CRITFC to assess sanitation and safety conditions of fishing access sites. Specifically, in 2021, Interior included funding for the assessment of conditions at fishing access sites in its long-standing self-determination contract with CRITFC. CRITFC subcontracted with a firm to assess site conditions and develop a report of its findings. The subcontractor reviewed historical information, assessed environmental and facilities conditions at individual sites, interviewed CRITFC representatives, conducted outreach to Tribes and site users, and provided recommendations to improve site conditions. The subcontractor issued its *Site Assessment Project Report: Columbia River In-Lieu and Treaty Fishing Access Sites* in October 2022.¹⁷

Overall, the report identified several urgent issues across sites, including dilapidated restrooms, outdated fish-cleaning stations, and the accumulation of abandoned property, which made the sites unsafe for tribal member families and children. To prioritize improvement projects, it also ranked fishing access sites from highest to lowest need based on three criteria: (1) conditions of facilities and grounds, (2) environmental conditions, and (3) site use.¹⁸ Based on the combined rank, nine sites were ranked as high priority, eight as medium priority, and 12 as low priority (see appendix II for a categorized list of sites). CRITFC and its subcontractor used the site rankings to develop a construction timeline for improvement projects that prioritized sites based on overall site need.

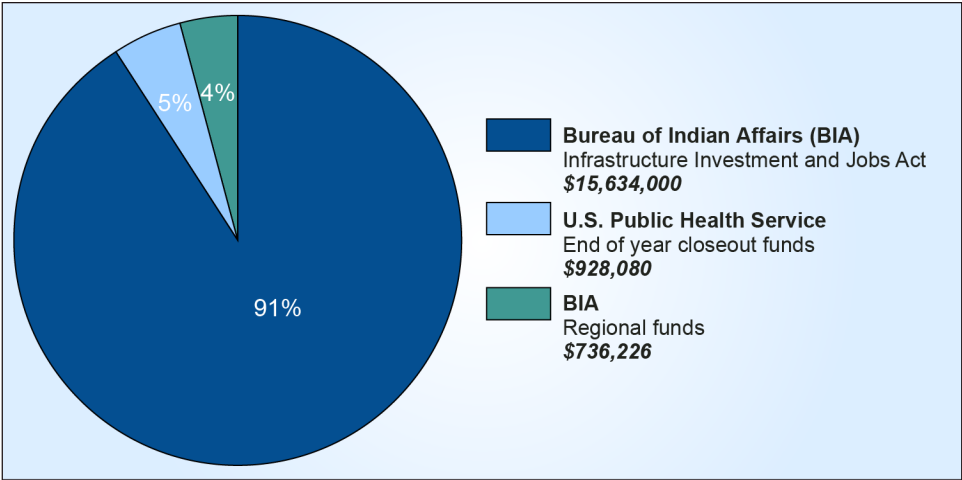
The Site Assessment Report also identified types of projects to improve site conditions and mitigate health, safety, and sanitation risks at the site locations. It grouped projects into three categories: (1) replace existing broken or worn-out facility components consistent with the original design of the site, (2) update facility components to meet current levels of use, and (3) modernize facility components to meet future levels of use. The report ranked each type of project as high, medium, or low impact, from lowest to highest, across five weighted factors: site aesthetics, site usability, security and safety, health and sanitation, and essential services (see appendix II for a full list of projects).¹⁹

What actions has Interior taken to improve sanitation at Columbia River fishing access sites since 2020?

Since fiscal year 2020, Interior has secured funding from a variety of sources for fishing access site sanitation improvements; amended its self-determination contract with CRITFC to include construction of specific projects; and spent \$17.3 million on site assessment, design, and construction of sanitation improvement projects, as of February 2026. Interior used Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) funds to improve sanitation at the sites. CRITFC has also worked to improve human health and safety at fishing access sites by partnering with local groups that offer health and educational services to tribal members.²⁰

Funding sources. The majority of the funds Interior used to improve sanitation at fishing access sites were from BIA's IIJA appropriation for the construction of water sanitation and other facilities, according to BIA funding data.²¹ In addition, the U.S. Public Health Service (PHS), which provides public health support and expertise to BIA staff, provided approximately \$1 million.²² BIA's Northwest region also supplied approximately \$700,000 in funds, according to BIA funding documents (see fig. 5).

Figure 5: Funding Sources for Department of the Interior’s Site Assessment and Safety and Sanitation Improvements at Columbia River Fishing Access Sites, Fiscal Years 2021 Through 2025



Source: GAO summary of BIA funding data. | GAO-26-108201

Accessible Data for Figure 5: Funding Sources for Department of the Interior’s Site Assessment and Safety and Sanitation Improvements at Columbia River Fishing Access Sites, Fiscal Years 2021 Through 2025

Category	Dollar amount
BIA - Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act	\$15,634,000.00
PHS - End of Year Closeout Funds	\$928,080.00
BIA - Regional Funds	\$736,226.00

Source: GAO summary of BIA funding data. | GAO-26-108201

Sanitation improvements. Interior has begun or completed sanitation projects at seven fishing access sites through an amended self-determination contract with CRITFC. The amended contract provides funding for CRITFC to design and construct projects to improve sanitation at the sites.

- **Design.** As of February 2026, CRITFC and its subcontractor have begun or completed the design of sanitation projects at five sites. They have nearly finished designs for site-wide improvements at the Cooks and North Bonneville sites. Further, they began the design process for site-wide improvements for the Lone Pine, Cascade Locks, and Lyle sites. These designs include projects such as second restrooms and dishwashing stations (see fig. 6).

Figure 6: Example of Existing Infrastructure That CRITFC Plans to Improve at the Lone Pine Fishing Access Site on the Columbia River



Existing fish-drying sheds, originally built in the 1970s, that the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (CRITFC) plans to convert into a second restroom at the site.

Source: GAO. | GAO-26-108201

- **Construction.** As of February 2026, CRITFC and its subcontractor had begun or completed the construction of sanitation projects at three sites. CRITFC and the subcontractor replaced the main water line at the Cascade Locks site, replaced a septic drain field and pump at the Roosevelt site, and installed a water softener system at the Pasture Point site. When we visited Pasture Point in June 2025, CRITFC representatives showed us potential installation spots within the pumphouse at the site. CRITFC installed the water softener system in September 2025.
- **Well-deepening project.** When we visited the Cooks site in June 2025, CRITFC representatives and BIA regional officials told us about a recent well-deepening project at the site to resolve water quality issues. They explained that water from the site's well had hosted *E. coli* for 7 years, which they eventually discovered was a result of site users tapping into the well for plumbing. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued an emergency administrative order in 2019 requiring BIA, within 15 days, to submit a plan and schedule of actions to address the *E. coli* contamination. According to a BIA regional official, this order allowed BIA to quickly access the Northwest region's year-end funding so CRITFC could drill a new 300-foot well to replace the original 65-foot well. This resolved the issue, and, in 2021, EPA declared the water system to be in compliance with the order.

BIA regional officials told us that overall construction work to date has been limited due to planning and design process requirements, timing considerations, and abandoned property at the sites. According to officials, site space limitations and the presence of cultural resources necessitate detailed and lengthy planning, coordination, and consultation with the Tribes. Additionally, due to the importance of the fishing access sites to the Tribes, the timing of construction season is shortened to avoid disrupting fishing activities. Finally, officials told us that abandoned property at the sites has increased the cost, complexity, and timelines for projects at most of the sites.²³

What actions has Interior taken to improve safety at the Columbia River fishing access sites since 2020?

As of February 2026, Interior has not directly improved safety infrastructure at the fishing access sites because it did not receive the appropriations authorized by the act to make safety improvements. However, CRITFC plans to complete safety improvement projects over the next few years using funding it received through its self-determination contract with Interior. Outside of safety infrastructure improvements, CRITFC representatives told us they coordinate with other entities to improve safety at the sites, provide safety education to site users, and work with other law enforcement offices.

Safety infrastructure improvements. During our site visits in 2025, we did not observe any safety infrastructure improvements recommended in the Site Assessment Report, such as lights, cameras, and fire standpipes. According to CRITFC's construction timeline, the commission plans to install lights and security cameras at most fishing access sites over the next few years. Additionally, due to the prevalence of wildfires in the area, CRITFC plans to install fire hydrant standpipes at heavily used sites in the more arid parts of the basin. CRITFC and its subcontractor completed designs and requested permits to install fire standpipes at the North Shore, Le Page, Preacher's Eddy, and Dallesport sites.²⁴

Coordination with other organizations. CRITFC and partner organizations provide fire safety education to site users to address risks associated with electrical access and fuel use (see fig. 7). At sites with increased use, CRITFC identified fire safety concerns related to distribution of fuel-related equipment. According to CRITFC representatives, outside organizations had been providing propane tanks to site users, which caused an increase in fire incidents. In response, CRITFC established coordination protocols to ensure approval for services and materials provided at sites and education for users of the tanks. Officers from CRITFC's law enforcement arm, Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fisheries Enforcement (CRITFE), told us this is especially important since local fire departments may not respond to fires at the sites and CRITFE has limited capacity to handle fire incidents.²⁵

Figure 7: Examples of Fire Safety Hazards at Columbia River Fishing Access Sites



Light pole with exposed wire in tall dry grass posing risk of fire.

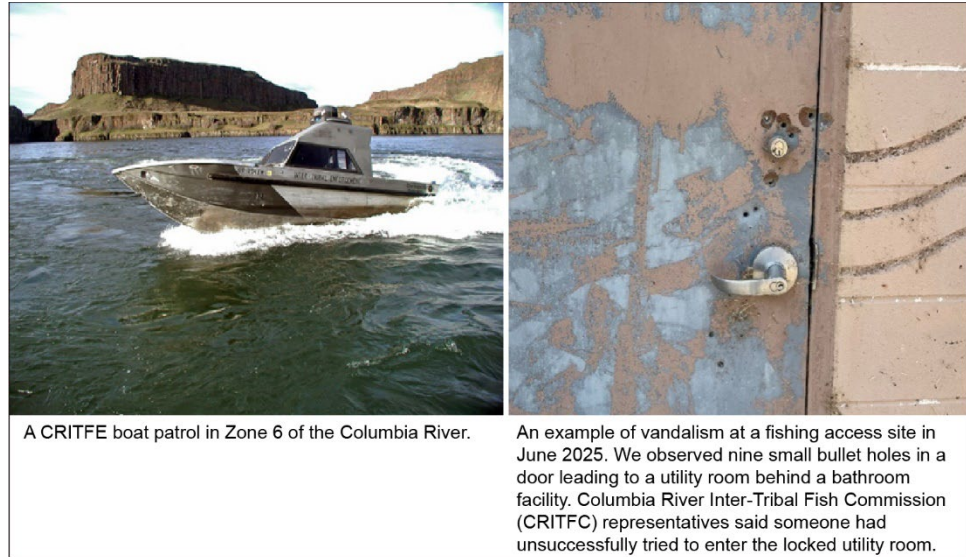
Remnants of a burned trailer caused by use of propane tanks and other discarded items in front of the Dalles Dam.

Source: GAO. | GAO-26-108201

Increased coordination with law enforcement entities. Under CRITFC's 2011 self-determination contract with Interior, CRITFE conducts law enforcement activities at fishing access sites and coordinates with other law enforcement entities to provide police services to the sites. According to CRITFE officers, several enforcement agencies share jurisdiction of the sites, including at the tribal, local, state, and federal levels. CRITFE officers specifically told us about increased coordination on marine patrols and vandalism by non-tribal members at the sites (see fig. 8).

- **Marine patrol.** According to CRITFE officers and CRITFC representatives, a drowning near the Cascade Locks site revealed coordination issues resulting from jurisdictional confusion between local law enforcement and CRITFE. This is especially important in the case of distress calls from the water, because CRITFE officers are sometimes the only law enforcement able to respond due to their training in marine patrol and boat use. As a result of this incident, local law enforcement now route distress calls and share relevant information with CRITFE, especially for calls for service on the water. A CRITFC representative told us that with this coordination in place, CRITFE officers have since saved six potential drowning victims.
- **Vandalism by non-tribal members.** Officers told us that non-tribal members often vandalize the sites, especially in remote areas. CRITFE officers told us that more remote sites see more vandalism because it is harder to patrol these sites. There are also no security cameras in more remote locations, which makes it easier for people to vandalize the sites. CRITFE detains non-tribal members until they can be released into the custody of a law enforcement agency with jurisdiction to make arrests and prosecute individuals who are charged with crimes.

Figure 8: Examples of a Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fisheries Enforcement (CRITFE) Marine Patrol and of Vandalism at a Columbia River Fishing Access Site



A CRITFE boat patrol in Zone 6 of the Columbia River.

An example of vandalism at a fishing access site in June 2025. We observed nine small bullet holes in a door leading to a utility room behind a bathroom facility. Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (CRITFC) representatives said someone had unsuccessfully tried to enter the locked utility room.

Source: CRITFC (left); GAO (right). | GAO-26-108201

How has Interior consulted with Columbia River Treaty Tribes to implement sanitation and safety improvements at Columbia River fishing access sites?

Since 2024, Interior has periodically consulted with the four Tribes for several purposes, including to discuss planned improvement projects at fishing access sites; identify historic properties, including those with religious or cultural importance; and assess and resolve any adverse effects of planned improvements to those properties. According to BIA regional officials we interviewed, formal tribal consultations have primarily focused on avoiding, minimizing, and mitigating potential impacts to archaeological sites from planned improvement projects at fishing access sites, under section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended.²⁶

For example, in February 2024, BIA began consultation with the four treaty Tribes, CRITFC, and Washington State's historic preservation office for a project at the North Bonneville Fishing Access Site. The consultation determined the project would have an adverse effect on an archaeological site. BIA must now reach agreement with Washington State's historic preservation officer on how to address the adverse impacts to this historic property, which is to be documented in a draft memorandum of agreement (MOA).²⁷ BIA has developed a draft MOA that takes into consideration the agency's attempts to consult with the Tribes to minimize and mitigate impacts to the property. As of February 2026, the mitigation measures in the draft MOA were still being finalized and BIA regional officials will have to implement them once the MOA is signed.

How has Interior coordinated with other entities to maintain the Columbia River fishing access sites and fund improvements?

To maintain fishing access sites and fund improvements, Interior has coordinated with the Corps on maintenance, and with PHS on technical support. In addition, Interior's oversight of CRITFC's O&M requires coordination. Through these efforts, BIA has received assistance to support the implementation of improvement projects.

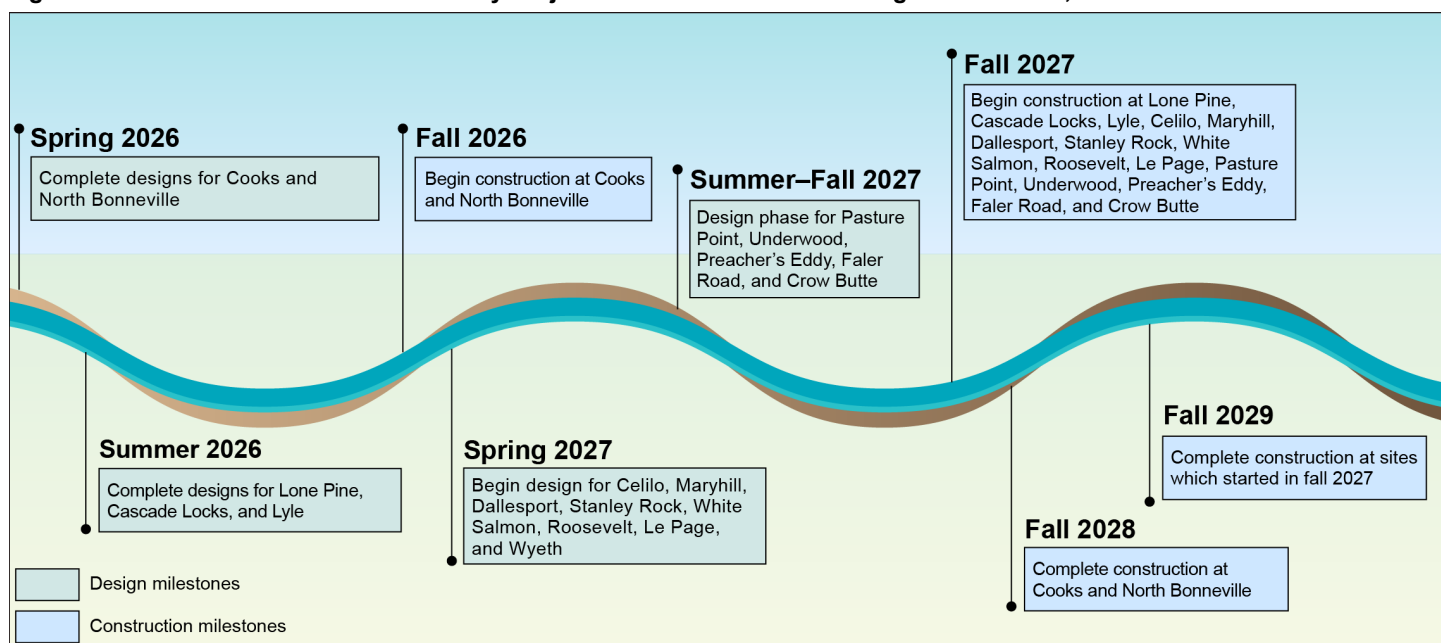
- **Corps.** According to BIA regional officials, BIA and Corps officials coordinate to discuss potential land transfers and address environmental concerns at sites. The agencies meet jointly with CRITFC on maintenance and improvement of Corps-administered sites.
- **PHS.** PHS has provided subject matter expertise and technical support to the BIA Northwest Regional Office. Specifically, a dedicated PHS public health specialist provided subject matter expertise, attended project meetings, and conducted site visits to investigate health concerns. In summer 2025, PHS staff informed BIA regional officials that PHS's role would be reduced. BIA regional officials told us that BIA and CRITFC have made requests to PHS for continued assistance and involvement.
- **CRITFC.** In 2021 and 2022, Interior expanded CRITFC's role by amending its self-determination contract to include funding for site assessments and construction of improvement projects. Both BIA officials and CRITFC representatives have praised their working relationship. Specifically, at a 2024 improvement project groundbreaking, the BIA Director called the partnership with CRITFC "a model of how we should operate in Indian Country." CRITFC representatives told us that the current BIA regional facilities staff have been highly responsive and diligent in addressing CRITFC site concerns and funding issues as they arise.

In turn, CRITFC is building effective relationships with site users to respectfully address longstanding issues such as abandoned property and storage of personal belongings, according to BIA regional officials and CRITFC representatives. For example, at our June 2025 site visit, CRITFC representatives told us that they were working with site users at the Cooks site to relocate their personal items and prevent them from storing new items in the area where a wastewater treatment system will be installed. Representatives told us that because CRITFC has worked to develop positive relationships with site users, the users are more invested in the project and will help keep the area clear of items that would hinder construction, such as abandoned property.

What are Interior's future plans to address sanitation and safety at Columbia River fishing access sites?

Interior, through CRITFC and its subcontractor, plans to use most of the IIJA appropriations and PHS end-of-year closeout funds to support additional sanitation and safety projects such as restroom updates, water line repairs, and security camera installation. BIA regional officials told us that the remaining needs at the sites are significant, and additional funding is necessary to continue with repairs and improvements. To prioritize work on critical improvements through 2029, CRITFC and its subcontractor created a construction timeline of projects, which includes sanitation and safety projects at most fishing access sites (see fig. 9).

Figure 9: Timeline for Sanitation and Safety Projects at Columbia River Fishing Access Sites, 2026–2029



Source: GAO analysis of Bureau of Indian Affairs and Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission data and information. | GAO-26-108201

The specific sanitation projects vary by site and include fish-cleaning stations with a grinder and sump pump, dishwashing stations, second restrooms, drainage improvements, and a water line repair (see fig. 10). The safety projects include lights and security camera installation at most fishing access sites. CRITFC estimated that these initial projects will cost approximately \$14.1 million to complete by 2029. For more details on the project costs, see appendix III.

Figure 10: Examples of Fish-Cleaning Stations at Columbia River Fishing Access Sites in June 2025



Example of a fish-cleaning station at Lyle fishing access site.



Example of a site user utilizing a station to clean fish at Lone Pine.

Source: GAO. | GAO-26-108201

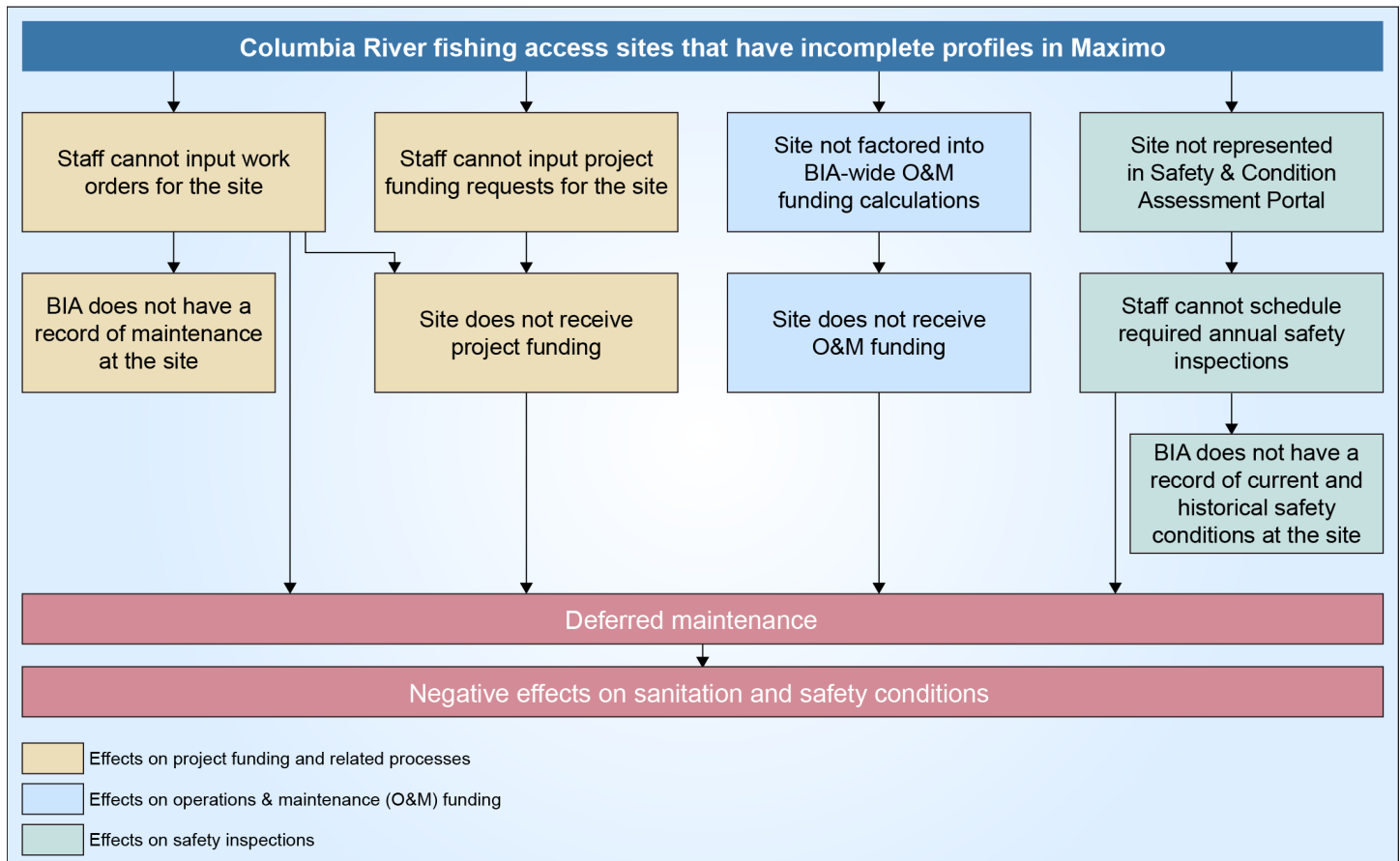
However, these initial projects do not meet all the needs identified in the October 2022 *Site Assessment Report*. For example, the initial projects do not include deferred maintenance, demolition and restoration of existing docks and ramps, or abandoned titled property removal. BIA regional officials said that additional funding will be needed to undertake projects to replace broken infrastructure and make other necessary improvements to the sites.

What challenges exist implementing additional improvement projects at Columbia River fishing access sites?

Interior faces challenges in its ability to plan and implement additional improvement projects at the fishing access sites due to incomplete site information in the Indian Affairs facilities management system (Maximo), O&M funding formula limitations, and unclear policies and implementation guidance.

Incomplete site information in Maximo. Not all of the Columbia River fishing access sites are properly accounted for because they do not have complete profiles in Maximo. Many sites remain listed as “incomplete” due to unfinished administrative steps. According to BIA regional officials, agency-administered properties, including fishing access sites, that have incomplete profiles in Maximo may face funding challenges during the annual planning and budget decision process because they need to be listed as “complete” before they can access O&M and other funding (see fig. 11).²⁸ Further, officials told us that incomplete sites are also not included in the system officials use to schedule and document annual safety inspections. These officials told us that no safety inspections are planned for any of the sites listed as incomplete in 2026.

Figure 11: Examples of Challenges Caused by Incomplete Profiles for Columbia River Fishing Access Sites in the Indian Affairs Facilities Management System, Maximo



Source: GAO analysis of information provided by Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) officials and agency documentation. | GAO-26-108201

According to Interior guidance and a policy manual from the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs (Indian Affairs), property owned by Interior and its bureaus must be properly accounted for and undergo periodic condition assessment surveys to ensure proper accountability, maintenance, and inventory of all property.²⁹ In addition, an Indian Affairs handbook calls for annual safety inspections at BIA sites.³⁰

BIA regional officials told us that they twice asked the Indian Affairs central office to complete the profiles for all Columbia River fishing access sites in September 2023 and again in April 2025. However, the Indian Affairs central office staff working on data entry for these systems left the agency due to workforce reductions in 2025. As a result, the timeline for completing data entry has been unclear. Following our June 2025 site visit, BIA regional and Indian Affairs central office officials worked together to complete profiles for additional sites in Maximo. As of February 2026, BIA and Indian Affairs officials told us that it was still unclear how many sites were operational in Maximo.

According to BIA regional officials, IJA funding is finite and therefore additional work at the fishing access sites will likely be funded through other means, such as O&M funding.³¹ By making the remaining sites operational in Maximo, BIA would be able to use the information to better inform future funding decisions. This could improve BIA and CRITFC's ability to continue improvement projects at the fishing access sites.

O&M funding formula limitations. BIA regional officials raised concerns that even if all sites are operational in Maximo, Indian Affairs' formula for O&M funding may not factor in all O&M needs at the sites, resulting in insufficient O&M funding to the Columbia River fishing access sites.³² Officials explained that fishing access sites are unique compared to other BIA property because unlike BIA property that can be classified as buildings, the sites largely consist of grounds and structures that would not be considered buildings, such as fish-cleaning stations, fencing, and wastewater treatment systems. However, Indian Affairs' O&M funding formula only accounts for buildings and not other types of property such as grounds and structures. As a result, grounds and other structures at fishing access sites would not be factored into the current O&M funding formula or receive funds.

The Indian Affairs policy manual states that the agency is to ensure proper maintenance of all property under BIA's control.³³ If Indian Affairs, in consultation with Tribes, updates the O&M funding formula to include all property, the sites could be eligible to receive funding to properly maintain grounds and structures, including those that are not considered buildings. This could potentially reduce instances of deferred maintenance and lessen negative impacts on sanitation and safety conditions at the sites.

Unclear policies and guidance. Unclear policies and guidance have caused inefficient and limited communication, unclear or misaligned roles, and unleveraged resources, which have slowed agency efforts to improve conditions at Columbia River fishing access sites.

Inefficient and limited communication. BIA regional officials have expressed concern about communication with the Indian Affairs central office on when and how the office would make process improvements. For example, the current project design process uses paper submissions rather than electronic submissions at three different phases of the process, slowing down reviews. BIA regional officials said they have previously requested electronic submission of design documents, but the Indian Affairs central office denied this request.³⁴ Indian Affairs officials told us it is developing an initiative to transition from paper-based to electronic submissions by the end of fiscal year 2026 but could not provide a time frame for the transition. BIA regional officials told us that they were unaware of the initiative and when it will be implemented.

- **Unclear or misaligned roles.** We observed a lack of clarity and possible misalignment in roles between Indian Affairs central office and BIA regional officials. For example, the Indian Affairs policy manual says that the central office is responsible for managing Maximo but does not provide clear guidance on how to update data in the system. The policy manual instructs regional management to maintain accurate inventory of assets in Maximo, but regional staff do not have the authority to make changes in the system. As a result, BIA regional staff manually send data corrections to the central office, which has caused delays and incomplete site data. Indian Affairs central office officials told us that they need more regular communication with BIA regional offices to maintain and update Maximo. BIA regional officials agreed and volunteered to help update data directly as allowed.
- **Unleveraged resources.** BIA regional officials told us that the Indian Affairs central office designates only one manager to conduct the design approval process for projects across the country. This manager is responsible for reviewing project designs, conducting in-person final inspections, and granting certificates of occupancy for projects with life safety components.³⁵ Indian Affairs officials said that the central office conducts final inspections to ensure consistent agency-wide compliance with safety and health codes, policies, and standards at the time of project completion. However, according to BIA regional officials and the Indian Affairs policy manual, regional safety managers have similar responsibilities, such as conducting annual safety inspections of regional facilities, and submitting site visit and hazard reports, internal control reviews, and corrective action plans. Regional safety managers' familiarity with the inspection process could make them suitable to take on additional authority, according to BIA regional officials.

GAO's *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government* state that management should communicate relevant and quality information to ensure that personnel understand and achieve objectives and address related risks.³⁶ Additionally, the standards state that management should assign responsibility and delegate authority to help the agency operate efficiently and effectively.³⁷ Furthermore, GAO's *Leading Practices to Enhance Interagency Collaboration* state that agencies should clarify roles and responsibilities and leverage resources.³⁸ By updating policies and guidance, Indian Affairs could (1) improve communication between the Indian Affairs central office and BIA regional officials, (2) clarify roles and responsibilities on who can maintain its facilities management system, and (3) more effectively delegate authority and leverage resources to ensure design approval work is conducted consistently and expeditiously. These actions could in turn help Indian Affairs ensure agency-wide compliance with relevant health and safety standards and BIA improve conditions at Columbia River fishing access sites.

Conclusions

To help mitigate the impacts of federal dams on Tribes' treaty fishing rights, the U.S. government acquired lands to create, improve, and maintain Columbia River fishing access sites. Over several decades, deferred maintenance and heavy use of the sites have caused significant wear and tear on the sites' infrastructure, and funding for Interior to maintain conditions and make future improvements at the 29 sites it administers has been limited. Furthermore, Interior faces challenges in planning and implementing additional improvement projects due to incomplete site information in the agency's facilities management system, limitations in the agency's O&M funding formula, and unclear policies and implementation guidance.

However, updating the information in Interior's systems for the remaining fishing access sites could help the agency ensure that improvements for all sites are considered in resource allocation decisions and that all sites are scheduled for annual safety inspections and regular maintenance. Additionally, after consultation with Tribes, factoring all property into BIA's future O&M funding formula could help ensure proper maintenance at all Columbia River fishing access sites.

Finally, although BIA has begun or completed construction projects to improve sanitation at three sites since 2020, unclear policies and guidance have led to inefficient and limited communication, unclear or misaligned roles, and unleveraged resources that slow the design and approval processes for new projects. Were Indian Affairs policies updated, and implementation guidance developed to address these issues, the Indian Affairs central office could help ensure compliance with relevant health and safety standards and BIA could improve conditions of Columbia River fishing access sites in a timely manner.

Recommendations for Executive Action

The Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs should take the necessary steps to update incomplete information for remaining fishing access sites in Interior's facilities management system to inform future funding decisions and ensure all sites are inspected for safety. (Recommendation 1)

The Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs should, in consultation with Tribes, update its operations and maintenance funding formula to include all property, including structures that are not considered buildings, at fishing access sites that are eligible to receive funding for maintenance. (Recommendation 2)

The Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs should update its policy manual and develop implementation guidance to allow the Central Office to (1) improve communication with BIA regional officials, (2) clarify roles and responsibilities on who can maintain its facilities management system, and (3) more effectively delegate authority and leverage resources. (Recommendation 3)

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to the Department of the Interior for review and comment. Interior did not provide a formal comment letter. Interior stated in an email that the agency generally agreed with our recommendations.

How GAO Did This Study

We reviewed Interior's actions from 2020 through 2025 for the 29 fishing access sites Interior was authorized to assess and improve by the 2019 Columbia River In-Lieu and Treaty Fishing Access Sites Improvement Act.

To examine how Interior has identified and assessed improvement needs for the sites, we reviewed relevant laws, regulations, agency documentation, funding data, and site assessment project reports. Based on our review of agency guidance, funding data, and interviews with agency officials, we described Interior's internal process to identify and plan infrastructure improvement projects and the sources of funding.

To understand how Interior consulted with the Columbia River Treaty Tribes and coordinated with other entities, we reviewed Interior's consultation policy, the regulations implementing section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, and GAO's collaboration criteria. We reviewed Interior's consultation notification letters to the Columbia River Treaty Tribes and summary documentation that described the purpose of the consultations. We reviewed agency documentation on the development and historic transfer of fishing access sites from the Corps to Interior and the coordinated management of sites, and coordination with PHS to secure funding.

To identify the actions Interior has taken to improve conditions of the sites, we reviewed agency project plans, project-based funding data, and construction timelines for completed, in-progress, and future projects. We summarized data on funding and assessed reliability by interviewing officials and testing the data, such as looking for mismatched totals. We determined the data were reliable for purposes of this report. We also reviewed the 2022 Site Assessment Report, and site visit observations to identify additional site needs.

We applied criteria from agency guidance, and applicable federal standards for internal control to our findings.

For all of our work, we visited a nongeneralizable sample of 13 fishing access sites to observe sanitation and safety conditions. We selected the sites based on a mix of usage levels, site types, and conditions. We interviewed BIA Northwest Regional and Indian Affairs central officials as well as representatives from CRITFC and its subcontractor responsible for designing and constructing improvement projects at the sites. In addition, we conducted outreach to the leaders of the four Columbia River Treaty Tribes to request interviews to learn about their experiences with the fishing access sites and their perspectives on Interior's actions to (a) assess and improve the sites and (b) consult with the Tribes. The Tribes did not respond to our requests for an interview.

We conducted this performance audit from March 2025 to June 2026 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

List of Addressees

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
Chairman
The Honorable Brian Schatz
Vice Chairman
Committee on Indian Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Bruce Westerman
Chairman
The Honorable Jared Huffman
Ranking Member
Committee on Natural Resources
House of Representatives

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of the Interior, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

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Appendix I: Timeline of Key Events and Relevant Laws Pertaining to the Development of Columbia River Fishing Access Sites

Table 1 describes key events related to Columbia River fishing access sites, including the passage of relevant laws and construction of federal dams in Oregon and Washington. It also shows the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ (Corps) acquisition of lands and development of fishing access sites as well as the transfer of the sites to the Department of the Interior for the purpose of maintaining them.

Table 1: Timeline of Key Events and Relevant Laws Related to Columbia River Fishing Access Sites	
Date	Key events and relevant laws
1855	Four Tribes—the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon, and the Nez Perce Tribe—signed treaties with the U.S. government that reserved on- and off-reservation fishing rights. ^a
1938–1972	The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) built the Bonneville Dam (1938), the Dalles Dam (1957), the McNary Lock and Dam (1957), and the John Day Dam (1972) on the Columbia River in Oregon and Washington.
1942–1963	The Corps acquired and developed five fishing access sites with ancillary fishing facilities. ^b
1945	The River and Harbor Act of 1945 authorized the Corps to acquire lands and provide facilities in Oregon and Washington to replace fishing grounds submerged or destroyed as a result of construction of the Bonneville Dam. ^c The act provided that the lands and facilities are to be “subject to the same conditions, safeguards, and protections as the treaty fishing grounds submerged or destroyed” and they were eventually to be transferred to the Department of the Interior.
1955	The River and Harbor Act of 1945 was amended to increase its authorization of appropriations for acquiring lands and providing facilities for fishing access sites from \$50,000 to \$185,000. ^d Pub. L. No. 84-163 authorized the Corps to use appropriations to pay the Columbia River Treaty Tribes and others whose fishing rights and interests were impaired by the construction, operations, or maintenance of the Dalles Dam in Oregon. ^e Tribes received a total of \$28,888,395 for loss of fishing sites due to flooding caused by the Dalles Dam.

Date	Key events and relevant laws
1960	The Tribes expressed concerns that the Corps had not fulfilled its obligations to maintain the safe and sanitary conditions of the sites. According to a 1988 Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) report, the federal government and Tribes agreed to have the U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) inspect the sites for sanitary conditions and that the Tribes would supply funds for cleanup and garbage disposal through contracts that would be under BIA supervision. ^f
1964–1966	PHS completed two surveys of all sites and in 1966 reported that sanitary conditions at all the sites but one had deteriorated.
1977	The Columbia River Treaty Tribes created, by resolution, the Columbia Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (CRITFC).
1988	Pub. L. No. 100-581 authorized the acquisition of at least six new fishing access sites, improvement of existing and new sites, and maintenance of the existing and new sites until their transfer to Interior for maintenance. ^g
1996	Pub. L. No. 100-581 was amended to authorize the Corps to transfer funds to Interior for operation and maintenance of sites that were improved or developed under the law. ^h According to the 1995 memorandum of agreement between the Corps and Interior, the Corps would transfer the capitalized operations and maintenance funding for the fishing access sites.
1996–2012	The Corps acquired and developed 20 additional fishing access sites, pursuant to the 1988 law. The capitalized operations and maintenance funding the Corps transferred totaled approximately \$10.4 million.
1999–2011	The Corps transferred 24 fishing access sites to Interior for the purpose of maintaining them.
2000	Pub. L. No. 100-581 was further amended to increase the authorization of appropriations for the Corps to identify and acquire additional lands for at least six fishing access sites adjacent to the Bonneville Pool, as required by the 1988 law, from \$2 to \$4 million. ⁱ The Corps acquired lands for fishing access sites at East White Salmon, Lyle, White Salmon, Dallesport, Wyeth, and Stanley Rock.
2003	CRITFC entered into a self-determination contract with Interior to manage, operate, and maintain the fishing access sites transferred from the Corps to Interior. ^j
2011	The Corps completed its development of fishing access sites acquired since 1942. Facilities at the sites included: camping areas, weather access roads, boat ramps and docks, fish-cleaning facilities, dry sheds, net racks, restrooms, mechanical buildings, and shelters. CRITFC entered into a self-determination contract with Interior to provide police services to protect the lives and property of people at the fishing access sites.
2019	The Columbia River In-Lieu and Treaty Fishing Access Sites Improvement Act authorized Interior to assess current sanitation and safety conditions on lands, including all permanent federal structures and improvements on those lands, held by the United States for the benefit of the four Columbia River Treaty Tribes that were set aside pursuant to the 1945 and 1988 laws. ^k The law also authorized \$11 million in appropriations from fiscal year 2020 through 2025 for improvements to existing structures and infrastructure at the fishing access sites to improve sanitation and safety conditions.

Source: GAO review and analysis of relevant treaties, laws, and Corps, CRITFC, and Interior documents. | GAO-26-108201

^aTreaty with the Nez Percés, art. III, 12 Stat. 957, 958 (1855); Treaty with the Walla-Walla, Cayuse, etc., art. I, 12 Stat. 945, 946 (1855) (Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Reservation); Treaty with the Yakama Nation, art. III, 12 Stat. 951, 953 (1855); Treaty with Indians in Middle Oregon, art. I, 12 Stat. 963, 964 (1855) (Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation). We refer to these four tribes collectively as the Columbia River Treaty Tribes.

^bThe five sites acquired were: Big White Salmon in Washington, acquired in 1942; Little White Salmon in Washington, acquired in 1959; Lone Pine in Oregon, acquired in 1956; Wind River in Washington, acquired in 1959; and Cascade Locks in Oregon, acquired in 1963.

^c59 Stat. 10, 22.

^d69 Stat. 85 (1955).

^ePub. L. No. 84-163, 69 Stat. 354, 361 (1955).

^fThe Commissioned Corps of the U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) is one of the nation's uniformed services—a branch committed to the service of health. PHS provides public health support and expertise.

^gPub. L. No. 100-581, tit. IV, § 401(b), 102 Stat. 2938, 2944 (1988).

^hPub. L. No. 104-109, § 15, 110 Stat. 763, 766 (1996).

ⁱPub. L. No. 106-541, § 555, 114 Stat. 2572, 2679.

^jUnder the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975, as amended, tribal organizations and Tribes can enter into self-determination contracts with the Department of the Interior to take over administration of certain federal programs previously administered on their behalf. Pub. L. No. 93-638, 88 Stat. 2203 (codified as amended at 25 U.S.C. §§ 5301-5423). Self-determination contracts allow tribal organizations and Tribes to assume responsibility for managing the program's day-to-day operations, with BIA providing technical oversight to ensure the tribal organization or Tribe meets contract terms. Tribal organizations include legally established organizations of Indians which are controlled, sanctioned, or chartered by the governing body of an Indian tribe. 25 U.S.C. § 5304(f).

^kPub. L. No. 116-99, § 2, 133 Stat. 3254, 3254-3255 (2019).

Appendix II: Categorization of Sanitation and Safety Projects in the 2022 Site Assessment Report

In the 2022 *Site Assessment Project Report: Columbia River In-Lieu and Treaty Fishing Access Sites*, the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission's subcontractor identified projects to improve site conditions and mitigate health, safety, and sanitation risks at the sites.³⁹ To prioritize improvement projects, it also ranked fishing access sites from highest to lowest need based on three criteria: (1) conditions of facilities and grounds, (2) environmental conditions, and (3) site use.⁴⁰ Based on the combined rank, nine sites were ranked as high priority, eight as medium priority, and 12 as low priority. Table 2 lists the sites by category.

Table 2: Priority Rankings of Sites Based on the 2022 Site Assessment Project Report: Columbia River in-Lieu and Treaty Fishing Access Sites

Site priority	Site names
High	Celilo, Cooks Landing, Dallesport, Lone Pine, Lyle, Maryhill, North Bonneville, Stanley Rock, Underwood
Medium	Cascade Locks, Le Page, Pasture Point, Preacher's Eddy, White Salmon, Roosevelt, Wind River, Wyeth
Low	Alderdale, Alder Creek, Crow Butte, East White Salmon Fish Processing, Faler Road, Goodnoe, Moonay, North Shore, Pine Creek, Rock Creek, Rufus, Three Mile Canyon

Source: GAO analysis of Site Assessment Project Report. | GAO-26-108201

Note: The 2022 Site Assessment Report did not include Avery and Sundale, two shared-use sites administered by the Army Corps of Engineers, in the Site Need Ranking.

The site assessment grouped projects into three categories: (1) replace existing broken or worn-out facility components consistent with the original design of the site, (2) update facility components to meet current levels of use, and (3) modernize facility components to meet future levels of use. The report ranked each type of project as high, medium, or low impact across five weighted factors, from lowest to highest weight: aesthetics, site usability, security and safety, health and sanitation, and essential services.⁴¹ Table 3 details these projects.

Table 3: Categorization of Site Improvement Projects Recommended in the 2022 Site Assessment Project Report: Columbia River In-Lieu and Treaty Fishing Access Sites

Category	Projects	Aesthetics	Site usability	Security and safety	Health and sanitation	Essential services
Category 1: Replace broken or worn-out facility components	Abandoned titled property removal	high impact	high impact	high impact	high impact	high impact
Category 1: Replace broken or worn-out facility components	Restroom and shower demolition	medium impact	high impact	medium impact	high impact	high impact
Category 1: Replace broken or worn-out facility components	Restroom and shower restoration	medium impact	high impact	medium impact	high impact	high impact
Category 1: Replace broken or worn-out facility components	Vault toilet restoration	medium impact	high impact	medium impact	high impact	high impact
Category 1: Replace broken or worn-out facility components	Site environmental cleanup	high impact	high impact	medium impact	high impact	medium impact
Category 1: Replace broken or worn-out facility components	Fencing and gates	medium impact	high impact	high impact	low impact	high impact

Category	Projects	Aesthetics	Site usability	Security and safety	Health and sanitation	Essential services
Category 1: Replace broken or worn-out facility components	Dock and ramp demolition	medium impact	medium impact	high impact	medium impact	medium impact
Category 1: Replace broken or worn-out facility components	Dock and ramp restoration	medium impact	medium impact	high impact	medium impact	medium impact
Category 1: Replace broken or worn-out facility components	In-water fish waste removal	high impact	high impact	medium impact	high impact	low impact
Category 1: Replace broken or worn-out facility components	Dry shed restoration	medium impact	medium impact	low impact	medium impact	high impact
Category 1: Replace broken or worn-out facility components	Fire extinguisher cabinet	low impact	medium impact	high impact	medium impact	low impact
Category 1: Replace broken or worn-out facility components	Picnic shelter restoration	medium impact	medium impact	low impact	low impact	medium impact
Category 1: Replace broken or worn-out facility components	Minor road maintenance	low impact	medium impact	low impact	low impact	medium impact
Category 1: Replace broken or worn-out facility components	Safety railings	low impact	medium impact	medium impact	low impact	low impact
Category 1: Replace broken or worn-out facility components	Other deferred maintenance	high impact	medium impact	low impact	low impact	low impact
Category 2: Update to meet current needs	Security cameras	low impact	high impact	high impact	medium impact	medium impact
Category 2: Update to meet current needs	Grounds lighting	low impact	high impact	high impact	medium impact	medium impact
Category 2: Update to meet current needs	Fire standpipes	low impact	medium impact	high impact	low impact	high impact
Category 2: Update to meet current needs	Kitchen wash facility additions	low impact	medium impact	low impact	high impact	high impact
Category 2: Update to meet current needs	Fish waste management stations	low impact	medium impact	low impact	high impact	high impact
Category 2: Update to meet current needs	Vault toilet replacements	low impact	medium impact	low impact	high impact	high impact
Category 2: Update to meet current needs	Waste oil stations	low impact	medium impact	medium impact	medium impact	medium impact
Category 2: Update to meet current needs	Fish dry shed replacements	low impact	medium impact	low impact	medium impact	medium impact
Category 2: Update to meet current needs	Pump house replacement	low impact	low impact	low impact	medium impact	medium impact
Category 2: Update to meet current needs	Ceremonial shelter replacement	low impact	medium impact	low impact	low impact	medium impact
Category 3: Modernize to meet future needs	Laundry facility	low impact	medium impact	medium impact	high impact	medium impact
Category 3: Modernize to meet future needs	Second restroom and shower	low impact	medium impact	low impact	high impact	high impact

Key: ● = High impact, ● = Medium impact, ○ = Low impact

Source: GAO analysis of Site Assessment Project Report. | GAO-26-108201

Appendix III: Estimated Costs for Sanitation and Safety Projects at Columbia River Fishing Access Sites, 2026–2029

The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Northwest Regional Office provided us with contract modifications with budgets for proposed work and a construction timeline the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (CRITFC) and its subcontractor created for planned safety and sanitation projects. BIA, through CRITFC, plans to use Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act appropriations and end-of-year closeout funding from the U.S. Public Health Service to support these projects. Table 4 summarizes the overall estimated costs of these planned projects by category.

Table 4: Overall Estimated Cost of Planned Projects at Columbia River Fishing Access Sites, 2026–2029	
Category	Rounded estimated cost
Water and wastewater projects	\$11.8 million
Lighting, security, and fencing projects	\$1.3 million
Construction management	\$976,000
Total	\$14.1 million

Source: GAO analysis of Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fishing Commission projected construction timeline and estimated costs. | GAO-26-108201

Endnotes

¹Department of the Interior, Historic and Ongoing Impacts of Federal Dams on the Columbia River Basin Tribes (Washington, D.C.: June 2024).

²Treaty with the Nez Perces, art. III, 12 Stat. 957, 958 (1855); Treaty with the Walla-Walla, Cayuse, etc., art. I, 12 Stat. 945, 946 (1855) (Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Reservation); Treaty with the Yakama Nation, art. III, 12 Stat. 951, 953 (1855); Treaty with Indians in Middle Oregon, art. I, 12 Stat. 963, 964 (1855) (Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation). We refer to these four tribes collectively as the Columbia River Treaty Tribes.

³Department of the Interior, Historic and Ongoing Impacts of Federal Dams on the Columbia River Basin Tribes (Washington, D.C.: June 2024). U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Fulfillment of a Promise: A History & Summary of the Planning and Implementation of the Columbia River Treaty Fishing Access Sites, Volume 1 (Portland, OR: June 2012).

⁴Department of the Interior, Historic and Ongoing Impacts of Federal Dams on the Columbia River Basin Tribes (Washington, D.C.: June 2024).

⁵Department of the Interior, Historic and Ongoing Impacts of Federal Dams on the Columbia River Basin Tribes (Washington, D.C.: June 2024). U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Fulfillment of a Promise: A History & Summary of the Planning and Implementation of the Columbia River Treaty Fishing Access Sites, Volume 1 (Portland, OR: June 2012). Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, In Lieu Historical Summary, Revised (Portland, OR: April 1988).

⁶Department of the Interior, Historic and Ongoing Impacts of Federal Dams on the Columbia River Basin Tribes (Washington, D.C.: June 2024). Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, Spirit of the Salmon: WY-KAN-USH-MI WA-KISH-WIT 56 (2014).

⁷Five of the 31 sites were “in-lieu” sites acquired pursuant to the River and Harbor Act of 1945. 59 Stat. 10, 22. The other 26 sites were acquired pursuant to Public Law No. 100-581 and are known as Treaty Fishing Access Sites. Pub. L. No. 100-581, tit. IV, § 401(b)(1), 102 Stat. 2938, 2944 (1988). In this report, we refer to all sites acquired pursuant to both these laws as Columbia River fishing access sites.

⁸The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has not transferred two of the 31 sites to Interior. Tribal members have exclusive use of these sites, acquired pursuant to Public Law No. 100-581, during treaty fishing periods.

⁹The Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (CRITFC) coordinates management policy and provides fisheries technical services for the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon, and the Nez Perce Tribe. CRITFC's mission is "to ensure a unified voice in the overall management of the fishery resources, and as managers, to protect reserved treaty rights through the exercise of the inherent sovereign powers of the tribes." CRITFC, CRITFC Mission and Vision, <https://critfc.org/about-us/mission-vision/>, accessed March 20, 2026.

¹⁰In 1988, Pub. L. No. 100-581 authorized the Corps to maintain the fishing access sites until they were transferred to Interior for the purpose of maintaining them. Pub. L. No. 105-81, tit. IV, § 401(b)(2), 102 Stat. 2938, 2944 (1988). In 1996, this law was amended to authorize the Corps to transfer funds to Interior for operation and maintenance of the fishing access sites. Pub. L. No. 104-109, § 15, 110 Stat. 763, 766 (1996). A 1995 memorandum of agreement between the Corps and Interior provided that the Corps would transfer to Interior the amount allocated for capitalized operations and maintenance of the fishing access sites.

¹¹U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Fulfillment of a Promise: A History & Summary of the Planning and Implementation of the Columbia River Treaty Fishing Access Sites, Volume 1 (Portland, OR: June 2012).

¹²Under the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975, as amended, tribal organizations and Tribes can enter into self-determination contracts with the Department of the Interior to take over administration of certain federal programs previously administered on Tribes' behalf. Pub. L. No. 93-638, 88 Stat. 2203 (codified as amended at 25 U.S.C. §§ 5301-5423). Self-determination contracts allow tribal organizations and Tribes to assume responsibility for managing the program's day-to-day operations, with BIA providing technical oversight to ensure the Tribe meets contract terms. Tribal organizations include legally established organizations of Indians which are controlled, sanctioned, or chartered by the governing body of an Indian tribe. 25 U.S.C. § 5304(l).

¹³U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Fulfillment of a Promise: A History & Summary of the Planning and Implementation of the Columbia River Treaty Fishing Access Sites, Volume 1 (Portland, OR: June 2012).

¹⁴Pub. L. No. 116-99, § 2(a), 133 Stat. 3254, 3254 (2019).

¹⁵Pub. L. No. 116-99, § 2(d), 133 Stat. 3254, 3255 (2019).

¹⁶166 Cong. Rec. H8311, H8534 (Dec. 21, 2020) (joint explanatory statement directing \$1 million for law enforcement needs for treaty fishing sites and incorporating by reference H. Rep. No. 116-448 (2020), which directed \$1.3 million for BIA to assess and conduct key safety and sanitation improvements as authorized by the Columbia River In-Lieu and Treaty Fishing Access Sites Improvement Act); 168 Cong. Rec. H2477, H2486 (Mar. 9, 2022) (joint explanatory statement providing \$1.5 million for law enforcement needs and \$1.7 million for operations and maintenance, both as required to implement the act); 168 Cong. Rec. S8553, S8652 (Dec. 20, 2022) (joint explanatory statement directing \$1.3 million to generally implement the act). In addition, the explanatory statement accompanying Interior's fiscal year 2024 appropriation said it maintained funding for law enforcement needs, operations and maintenance needs, and implementation of the act at the fiscal year 2023 enacted level. 170 Cong. Rec. S1095, S1680 (Mar. 5, 2024).

¹⁷Akana, Site Assessment Project Report: Columbia River In-Lieu and Treaty Fishing Access Sites, Akana Project 21-047 (Portland, OR: October 2022).

¹⁸The Site Assessment Report used different weight factors for each of the categories. They are as follows: condition rank (2), environmental rank (2), and use rank (3). Additionally, the report considered the rank CRITFC assigned each site in an assessment the organization published in 2017.

¹⁹The Site Assessment Report used different weights for each factor. They are as follows: aesthetics (1), site usability (2), security and safety (3), health and sanitation (3), and essential services (3).

²⁰For example, CRITFC has an agreement with One Community Health. This group has a mobile health clinic that provides services such as vaccinations and boosters, diabetes care, school-based health services, and dental services. According to CRITFC representatives, One Community Health is authorized to come on-site to provide health services that are invaluable to the tribal community, especially the elderly and youth.

²¹Pub. L. No. 117-58, 135 Stat. 429, 1392 (2021).

²²The Commissioned Corps of the U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) is one of the nation's uniformed services—a branch committed to the service of health. Since 1960, the federal government and the Tribes have agreed to have PHS inspect the fishing access sites for sanitary conditions and complete sanitation surveys. PHS provides public health support and expertise to BIA staff.

²³According to BIA officials, abandoned property includes vehicles, equipment, garbage, excess materials, burned out trailers, and other similar items.

²⁴As of April 2026, CRITFC representatives told us that all fire standpipes, except for the one at Dallesport, have been put on hold due to in-water work permitting and cost.

²⁵CRITFE officers protect the tribal fishers who are exercising their treaty rights in Zone 6 of the Columbia River. CRITFE conducts boat patrols on the Columbia River and vehicle and foot patrols along the Oregon and Washinton shores of the Columbia River, which include the fishing access sites.

²⁶54 U.S.C. § 306108; 36 C.F.R. pt. 800. Under section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, and its implementing regulations, federal agencies must consult with Tribes when agency undertakings may affect historic properties, including those of traditional religious and cultural importance to Tribes, prior to the approval of the expenditure of federal funds or issuance of any license for the undertaking. See 54 U.S.C. §§ 306108, 302706(a).

²⁷36 C.F.R. § 800.6(b)(1)(iv).

²⁸According to Indian Affairs policy, O&M funding is for recurring annualized costs to maintain an asset's functionality and capacity over its expected life, among other things. Additionally, deferred maintenance is delayed maintenance and repairs that Indian Affairs officials told us are addressed by Facility Improvement and Repair funding. Indian Affairs officials also told us that a complete profile in Maximo is required for a site to access either source of funding.

²⁹Department of the Interior, Real Property and Financial Management Guide (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 30, 2003). Department of the Interior: Indian Affairs, Indian Affairs Manual: Property Management, Personal and Real Property Inventory, Part 23, Chapter 3 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 3, 2025).

³⁰Department of the Interior: Indian Affairs, Inspections and Abatement Program Handbook, 25 IAM 3H, Volume 4 (Albuquerque, NM: Nov. 25, 2025).

³¹BIA regional officials told us that without line-item appropriations, future funding will be available only through other sources, and the sites will have to compete nationally for a limited funding source. In February 2026, BIA regional officials told us that the Northwest Regional Office learned that an additional round of IJA funding for water sanitation and other facilities may be available. CRITFC is developing new scopes for funding requests, and the regional BIA office is coordinating the funding requests across multiple fishing access sites. BIA officials told us that IJA funding does not require the fishing sites to be operational in Maximo.

³²Department of the Interior: Indian Affairs, Indian Affairs Manual: Facilities Management Program, Operations and Maintenance Program, Part 80, Chapter 3 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 19, 2025).

³³Indian Affairs, Indian Affairs Manual: Property Management, Personal and Real Property Inventory, Part 23, Chapter 3 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 3, 2025).

³⁴Indian Affairs guidance instructs BIA officials to submit hard copies of design documents to the Indian Affairs Central Office. Indian Affairs officials told us that the regional office's request to electronically submit design documents was deferred because the Central Office did not have the necessary information technology infrastructure to receive, manage, and review design documents electronically.

³⁵The Indian Affairs official responsible for conducting these inspections can delegate this responsibility to qualified plan examiners and inspectors within the office. The official retains the ultimate responsibility for these inspections.

³⁶GAO, Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government, [GAO-25-107721](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 15, 2025).

³⁷In February 2026, we recommended that BIA systematically identify and assess opportunities for streamlining existing processes to help reduce the administrative burden for BIA staff and Tribes, enable BIA to better meet workload demands, and fulfill its responsibilities to Tribes as it adjusts its regional workforce capacity. Additionally, we reported that BIA planned to take steps to streamline work functions to enhance processes and improve delivery of services to Tribes. GAO, Indian Affairs: Opportunities Exist to Address Bureau's Strained Regional Workforce Capacity, [GAO-26-107940](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 17, 2026).

³⁸GAO, Government Performance Management: Leading Practices to Enhance Interagency Collaboration and Address Crosscutting Challenges, [GAO-23-105520](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 24, 2023).

³⁹Akana, Site Assessment Project Report: Columbia River In-Lieu and Treaty Fishing Access Sites, Akana Project 21-047 (Portland, OR: October 2022).

⁴⁰The Site Assessment Report used different weight factors for each of the categories. They are as follows: condition rank (2), environmental rank (2), and use rank (3). Additionally, the report considered the rank CRITFC assigned each site in an assessment the organization published in 2017.

⁴¹The Site Assessment Report used different weights for each factor. They are as follows: aesthetics (1), site usability (2), security and safety (3), health and sanitation (3), and essential services (3).