

Water Resources in the Middle Spokane Watershed (WRIA 57)

The Spokane-Coeur d'Alene watershed encompasses about 6,600 square miles in northeastern Washington and northern Idaho. The Spokane River runs 111 miles from the headwaters at Lake Coeur d'Alene to the Columbia River.

For management purposes, the Washington portion of the Spokane River watershed is divided into the Lower, Little and Middle Spokane, and Hangman watersheds. The Middle Spokane River watershed -- often referred to as Water Resource Inventory Area (WRIA) 57 -- includes about 285 square miles from the Washington/Idaho state line to the confluence with Hangman Creek. It is located in Spokane and Pend Oreille Counties.

WRIA 57 faces some serious water issues, including water supply for a growing population to be served primarily by the Spokane Valley-Rathdrum Prairie aquifer; declining flows and pollution in the Spokane River; and coordination with Idaho water interests and governments.

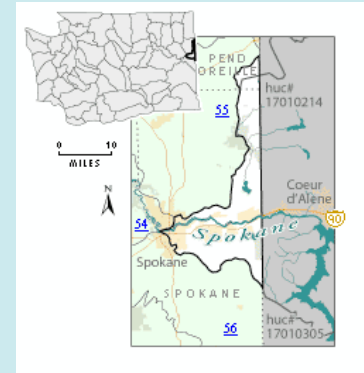
Water availability

The Spokane River mainstem is not formally closed to new water uses (appropriations). However, the watershed is over-appropriated, that is, all available water is legally "spoken for," and flows on the river are declining. Therefore any new water rights would be seasonal (interruptible), or the impacts of the water use would need to be fully offset (mitigated).

The mainstem and many streams in WRIA 57 are subject to administrative restrictions known as Surface Water Source Limitations (SWSLs). Often these will require that new water uses stop during low flow periods. Groundwater connected to the surface water sources are also subject to SWSL restrictions.

Spokane Valley-Rathdrum Prairie (SVRP) aquifer

The SVRP aquifer is the primary source of water for nearly 500,000 residents in Washington and Idaho. The SVRP aquifer and the Spokane River are intimately linked. Water withdrawals from the aquifer directly affect flows in the river.



WRIA 57

Definitions

Adjudication: A court conducted process used to determine the extent (amount), validity, and priority of water rights and claims in a given area.

SWSL: Surface Water Source Limitation. Administrative restrictions on water availability established by Ecology after recommendation and consultation with the Dept. of Fish and Wildlife (RCWs 90.22, 90.03 & 90.05). The intent of a SWSL is to protect fish and wildlife habitat.

TMDL: Total Maximum Daily Load. A water quality improvement plan that establishes limits for the amount of pollutants that are allowed in a water body without violating state water quality standards.

Watershed Planning: Under RCW 90.82, a framework for developing local solutions to water-related issues on a watershed basis.

WRIA: Water Resources Inventory Area; also known as a watershed or river basin. For environmental management purposes, Washington is divided into 62 WRIsAs.

The U.S. Geological Survey and the states of Washington and Idaho completed a bi-state study of the SVRP aquifer in 2007. The study investigated how much water is in the aquifer, where it is located, and how the aquifer interacts with the Spokane River.

Currently, state and local governments are discussing how to interact in the future to manage the aquifer for both states. This includes strategies for water conservation. The amount of water used per person in Spokane County is one of the highest in the state: about 217 gallons per day, nearly twice the state average.

Hydroelectric dams

Six hydroelectric dams managed by Avista Utilities are located on the mainstem Spokane River. Of these, the Idaho Post Falls Dam located downstream from the outlet of Lake Coeur d'Alene has the greatest effect on the river, especially during the summer low flow period. One hydroelectric dam, Upriver Dam, is managed by the City of Spokane between the Post Falls and the Monroe Street Dams.

Spokane River Basin adjudication

An important step in deciding whether water is available for new uses is to evaluate its legal availability. Ecology is currently researching and mapping water rights in the Spokane River Basin. For the 2009-2011 biennium, Ecology proposes to seek funding and legislative support for adjudication in the Spokane watersheds. An adjudication is essential for effective water management. It also supports Washington's interest in using interstate water as Idaho proceeds with a large-scale general adjudication of the Spokane River and tributaries in Idaho.

Water quality

The Spokane River suffers from several types of pollution. Ecology has completed a water quality improvement plan, or "total maximum daily load" (TMDL), to address dissolved metals. It is currently developing a plan to address dissolved oxygen (including nutrient reduction) and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs).

In a separate effort, the 2007 state Legislature dedicated funding in the "Urban Waters Initiative" to look for the sources of PCBs and other chemicals (dioxins & furans) to the Spokane River.

Since 2006, Ecology has focused environmental cleanup efforts to address PCB-contaminated sediments and mining wastes from Idaho's Silver Valley, targeting "hot spots" associated with recreation sites and important aquatic habitat.

Watershed planning

Planning under RCW 90.82 for WRIA 57 began in 1998. The planning unit decided to develop a joint watershed plan to include the Middle Spokane (WRIA 57) and Little Spokane River (WRIA 55) watersheds. The WRIA 55/57 management plan was adopted by Spokane, Stevens, and Pend Oreille Counties in January 2006.

A detailed implementation plan, the road map for putting the plan recommendations to work, was completed in February 2008. The plan recommendations focus on instream flow needs, water conservation, reclamation and reuse, permit-exempt wells, water rights and claims, and strategies for groundwater recharge.

The WRIA 57 and WRIA 54 (Lower Spokane River) planning units have been working together to conduct technical studies and develop instream flow recommendations for the Middle and Lower Spokane River to address minimum flow needs for fish habitat, water quality, recreation and navigation.

Shoreline Master Program

Spokane County and the cities of Spokane, Millwood, and Spokane Valley are all updating their shoreline master programs in 2008. Under the state's Shoreline Management Act (SMA) of 1971, counties and cities are required to develop plans and administrative ordinances to regulate development and protect shorelines of lakes, wetlands and streams. This includes protection of fish and wildlife habitat, public access and navigation. Protecting water quality and the "natural character" of shorelines and shorelands are also objectives of the SMA.

Water Rights in Washington State

Under state law, the waters of Washington collectively belong to the public and cannot be owned by any one individual or group. Instead, Ecology may grant individuals or groups the right to use them. Approval is given in the form of a water right permit.

You need a water right to use any surface water (water located above ground, such as lakes, rivers, streams and springs), *or* to use groundwater (water located under ground) at a rate of more than 5,000 gallons a day or to irrigate more than ½ acre of lawn and garden (see RCW 90.44.050).

Much of the water in Washington State has already been appropriated, which means it is spoken for and being used. This is making it more difficult to find water supplies for new growth and development, while still leaving enough water in our lakes and rivers for fish and other protected instream resources and values (such as wildlife, navigation, aesthetics and water quality).

Ecology is working closely with Washington communities to help them effectively manage their water, so we can meet current needs and help ensure future water availability for people, fish and the natural environment.

Water right transfers

More and more people are looking to change or transfer existing water rights to meet their water needs. Generally Ecology will consider changes to the following elements of a water right:

- Place of use.
- Point(s) of diversion or withdrawal.
- Purpose of use (including season of use).

Spokane County established a Water Conservancy Board as an additional avenue for processing water-right transfer applications.

For more information

The Spokane River Forum is a recently created independent organization that serves as one place to go to get information about “all things” Spokane River and to create new opportunities for the public to be engaged in Spokane River issues. Visit the website at:

<http://www.spokaneriver.net>.

Shoreline management

- Michael Maher, Shorelands & Environmental Assistance Program at 509-329-3584; mmah461@ecy.wa.gov
- Ecology website: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/sea/SMA/index.html>
- Contact your local government for SMA regulations in your area

Spokane River website

- http://www.ecy.wa.gov/geographic/spokane/spokane_river_basin.htm

Water quality

- David Moore, Water Quality Program at 509-329-3514; dmoo461@ecy.wa.gov
- Ecology website: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/tmdl/index.html>

Water rights

- General questions: Water Resources Program at 509-329-3400
- Technical questions: Gene Drury, Permit Writer at 509-329-3566; gdru461@ecy.wa.gov
- Ecology website: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/rights/water-right-home.html>

Watershed planning

- Sara Hunt, Shorelands & Environmental Assistance Program at 509-329-3579; sarh461@ecy.wa.gov
- Ecology website: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/watershed/index.html>

Other contacts

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Spokane Tribe
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<http://www.spokanetribe.com/>

Stevens County Water Conservancy Board
 Wes McCart at 509-258-4041
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 509-892-1001
<http://wdfw.wa.gov/reg/region1.htm>

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