

Proposed legislation would advance comprehensive policy for Yakima Basin water resources

The problem

The Yakima River Basin's water supplies are fully appropriated. Water infrastructure, programs and policies don't consistently meet the aquatic demands for fish and wildlife, habitat, dry-year irrigation and municipal water supply. These circumstances have created a significant deficit in water supply resulting in:

- A serious depletion of anadromous and resident fish populations from historic levels. Factors other than water supply contributing to depletion of fish populations include obstructions that prevent fish passage to upstream tributaries, degraded riparian habitat and altered stream flows that do not provide suitable conditions and outmigration flows for all life stages of fish.
- Insufficient water to meet the drought-year demands for irrigation water by existing users leading to severe prorationing (as low as 38 percent) for irrigation districts such as the Roza, Kittitas, Wapato and Kennewick.
- Uncertainty surrounding the legal reliability or availability of water for new uses due to declining aquifers and groundwater and surface water continuity.

Climate change projections for the Yakima River Basin indicate that future runoff and stream flow patterns will increase the need for prorationing and will further reduce flows for fish. The anticipated effects of climate change include decreased snowpack; decreased spring and summer runoff; increased crop and municipal water demand and more droughts.

The solution

Stakeholders in the Yakima Basin have worked diligently since early 2009 with Ecology and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation

WHY IT MATTERS

The Yakima Basin Integrated Water Management Plan, built on cooperation and collaboration among water users, lays the groundwork for stable water supplies decades into the future. The alternative to moving the plan forward is contentious and costly legal battles over water that will leave many losers among water users in the basin.

Legislative support for the plan will help ensure that:

- Communities in the Yakima Basin will have the water they need to support population growth and prosperity.
- Farmers will have water for healthy and expanding operations.
- Fish populations will thrive as habitat, fish passage and stream flows are restored.

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Focus on Yakima Basin water plan

(Reclamation) to develop and approve an Integrated Water Management Plan to address the serious water resource problems described above.

The stakeholder group, comprised of representatives of the Yakama Nation, federal, state, county and city governments; environmental organizations; and irrigation districts are ready to move forward with the plan after completion of a programmatic environmental impact statement by Ecology and Reclamation.

The Integrated Plan aims to restore river health and meet agriculture, municipal, and domestic needs in the Yakima basin. Elements of the plan include construction of fish passage at in-basin dams, habitat restoration, watershed protection, development of new surface water and groundwater storage, enhanced agricultural and municipal water conservation programs, and establishment of more effective water banking processes.

While the Integrated Water Management Plan incorporates approximately 57,000 ac-ft of water supply for municipal and domestic needs, it may take 20 or more years to obtain funding, authorization and to develop these new water supplies.

Interim water management policies and actions are needed until these new sources of water become available through storage, conservation, and other water management projects. Water resources must be managed conservatively to protect senior users and fisheries and we must seek ways to make water available for growing communities and industries.

Ecology's proposal

The intent of Ecology's legislative proposal is to set forth fundamentals of water resource and aquatic resource policy for the Yakima River Basin to ensure that resources of the state are managed and protected for the greatest benefit to the people of the state of Washington.

The legislation is intended to provide direction to the Department of Ecology, other state agencies and officials, and local governments in implementing a comprehensive water resource management for the Yakima River Basin in cooperation with the Yakama Nation, Bureau of Reclamation, and other federal agencies, and interested parties.

Policy legislation provides a needed framework to advance projects in the Yakima Basin to build on the momentum of the integrated plan, initiate measurable progress to address pending water right applications in the basin and seek collaborative solutions to help new groundwater users avoid risk and move their projects forward in a more reliable manner.

Focus on Yakima Basin water plan

How it will benefit Washington

The Yakima basin is a major contributor to Washington's \$40 billion food and agriculture industry. Implementing the integrated plan will ensure an adequate water supply for the economies of Yakima, Kittitas and Benton counties. The food and agriculture industries combined in those counties produce more than \$1.75 billion in crops, \$1.5 billion in food processing sales and support more than 5,500 jobs. Fish passage improvements will restore salmon, steelhead and bull trout to streams they haven't seen in decades. The integrated plan will help re-establish the largest sockeye salmon fishery in a basin from which sockeye disappeared a century ago.

More information

Go to: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/cwp/YBIP.html>