

Focus on: Drought Preparedness and Response

ESHB 1622



WHY IT MATTERS

Current statutes limit our ability to effectively prepare for and respond to drought emergencies. With climate forecasts predicting more frequent droughts, it's critical that we take a more proactive approach to drought preparedness and response. Our proposal will set up a framework to build long-term drought resiliency for our farmers, water suppliers, and environment while also improving the state's ability to quickly and effectively respond to drought emergencies.

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Proposed legislation

Drought preparedness and response, amending chapter 43.83B RCW.

The problem

The 2015 drought was one of the most extreme droughts in our state's recent history. A reduced snowpack, combined with a dry spring and summer resulted in extremely low streamflow in most watersheds across the state. The drought caused significant losses for the agriculture sector and to fisheries. Climate science tells us that the 2015 drought is a preview of possible future water supply conditions.

During 2015, we learned that the drought statutes (chapter 43.83B RCW) limited our ability to effectively and efficiently prepare for and respond to the emergency. The current framework emphasizes emergency response and provides a limited set of tools for addressing water supply shortages and emergencies. This limits our ability to proactively prepare for drought and to quickly and effectively respond when it occurs. Specifically,

- Lack of a dependable funding source causes uncertainty in drought response and makes it more difficult to plan the scope of response. In 2015, drought funding was not appropriated until four months after the initial drought emergency declaration, causing a delayed and inadequate response.
- Many good drought projects can't be funded under the emergency model. The current statutes limit emergency grants to only those projects that provide a benefit during the declared drought emergency. We denied nearly one-quarter of the grant applications we received because the projects would not have been completed before the drought emergency expired. Many good projects often require long-term planning and investment, and thus take longer than the emergency timeframe.

The solution

By modernizing the drought statutes, Ecology will be able to more effectively respond to drought in the short term, while also setting up a framework to strengthen the resiliency and preparedness of water users for drought in the long term.

Ecology's proposal

Our proposal would codify many of the best practices identified in the updated Washington State Drought Contingency Plan, which was developed collaboratively between eight state agencies. The proposal would:

- Better equip the state to deal with water shortages by authorizing Ecology to engage in drought preparedness and response work.
- Set up a framework to build long-term drought resiliency among water users throughout the state.
- Ensure that projects designed to support public water systems, agriculture, and environmental protection during droughts are all equitably eligible for grant funding.
- Improve Ecology's communication during water shortages by authorizing a drought advisory warning.
- Establish a pilot program to investigate the use of long-term water right leases as a drought preparedness strategy.
- Modernize the statute to better reflect current funding structures, accounts, and practices. These changes would repeal or decodify sections of statute that are inactive or outdated.

How it will benefit Washington

Drought can place significant hardship on our state's farmers, water suppliers, and environment. With mounting evidence that drought may become more frequent, it's critical that we address the issue proactively. Building long-term drought resiliency and improving our ability to quickly and effectively respond to drought emergencies will help to mitigate the impact of drought when it occurs, lessening the negative effects it can have on our water supplies for people, farms, and fish.

More information

Please visit our website at <https://ecology.wa.gov/Water-Shorelines/Water-supply/Water-availability/Statewide-conditions>

The updated Drought Contingency Plan is available at

https://www.ezview.wa.gov/site/alias_1962/view_our_committees_drought_contingency_plan/37293/drought_contingency_plan.aspx

Special accommodations

To request ADA accommodation including materials in a format for the visually impaired, call Ecology at 360-407-6872 or visit <https://ecology.wa.gov/accessibility>. People with impaired hearing may call Washington Relay Service at 711. People with speech disability may call TTY at 877-833-6341.