

WRIA 32 Walla Walla Watershed Water Availability



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What is a watershed?

Washington is divided into 62 major watersheds or Water Resource Inventory Areas (WRIAs), which are areas that each capture precipitation and funnel rain and snowmelt through smaller subbasins into streams, tributaries, and rivers and typically drain to marine waters or the Columbia River.

Introduction to WRIA 32

The Walla Walla Watershed or Water Resource Inventory Area (WRIA) 32 is defined as the area within Washington state that drains to the Walla Walla River, between the Oregon border and the river's confluence with the Columbia. There are also small areas that drain directly to the Columbia River. It is located in southeastern Washington, and includes most of Walla Walla County, and a large portion of Columbia County.

The Walla Walla River's major tributary is the Touchet River, but both rivers have numerous smaller tributary streams.

How can I get water?

Depending on your proposal, you may have more than one option to acquire a reliable water supply:

- Connecting to an existing water system is usually the fastest and easiest option if your project is within the system's service area.
- Using a permit-exempt well if you meet the limits under state law.
- Purchasing an existing water right and transferring it to the new use.
- Applying for a new water right, which may need mitigation.



See the *Options for Acquiring Water* section for more information about water right permit options and when to meet with Ecology staff.

Washington Water Law
Waters of the state belong to the public and can't be owned by any one individual or group. Water right holders have the right to use water, from a set source, for a particular purpose, in a specific location.

The Department of Ecology is responsible for managing the water resources of the state, including issuing the right to use water as well as protecting the instream resources for the benefit of the public.

Washington water law is based on the “prior appropriation” system, often called “first in time, first in right.” New water rights may not harm older water rights. Applications for water from the same source must be processed in the order they are received, although there are certain exceptions.

Applicable Laws and Regulations

- [RCW 90.03](#): Washington Water Code
- [RCW 90.44](#): Regulation of Public Groundwaters
- [RCW 90.54](#): Water Resources Act of 1971
- [WAC 173-532](#): Water Resources Program for the Walla Walla River Basin, WRIA-32

Water Availability Factors

Due to Washington’s varied land uses, terrain, and precipitation levels, water availability for new water right permits varies dramatically across the state. In the Walla Walla Watershed, key factors affecting water availability include:

- Seasonal/low precipitation levels.
- Instream flow rule.
- Existing water rights.

Precipitation

The annual precipitation in the Walla Walla Watershed ranges from 8 inches per year near its confluence with Columbia River, to a little over 45 inches in the higher elevations. Only a fraction of this precipitation becomes groundwater available for human and economic uses.

Most of the precipitation arrives during the winter months, when water demands are the lowest. During the summer, the snowpack is gone, there is little rain, and naturally low streamflows are dependent on groundwater inflow. This means that groundwater and surface water are least available when water demands are the highest.

Instream flow rule

Instream flow rules are an element of water and river management that help maintain healthy ecosystems that support fish, communities, and economies. WRIA 32 has an instream flow rule, adopted to preserve the uses and values of individual rivers and streams.

The instream flow rule:

- Protects the river from new permitted water rights by setting minimum flow levels, which are like water rights for the stream. Instream flows do not put water in the streams and do not affect existing (senior) water rights.
- Creates year-round or seasonal closures for some streams, protecting existing flows from new appropriations.

From June 1 to November 30, the following are closed to new consumptive uses:

- The Walla Walla River and all of its tributaries between the state-line and Detour Road at MP 5a.
- Mill Creek and all of its tributaries from the confluence with the Walla Walla to the headwaters.

All other rivers and streams in the basin are seasonally closed to new consumptive uses from May 1 to November 30.

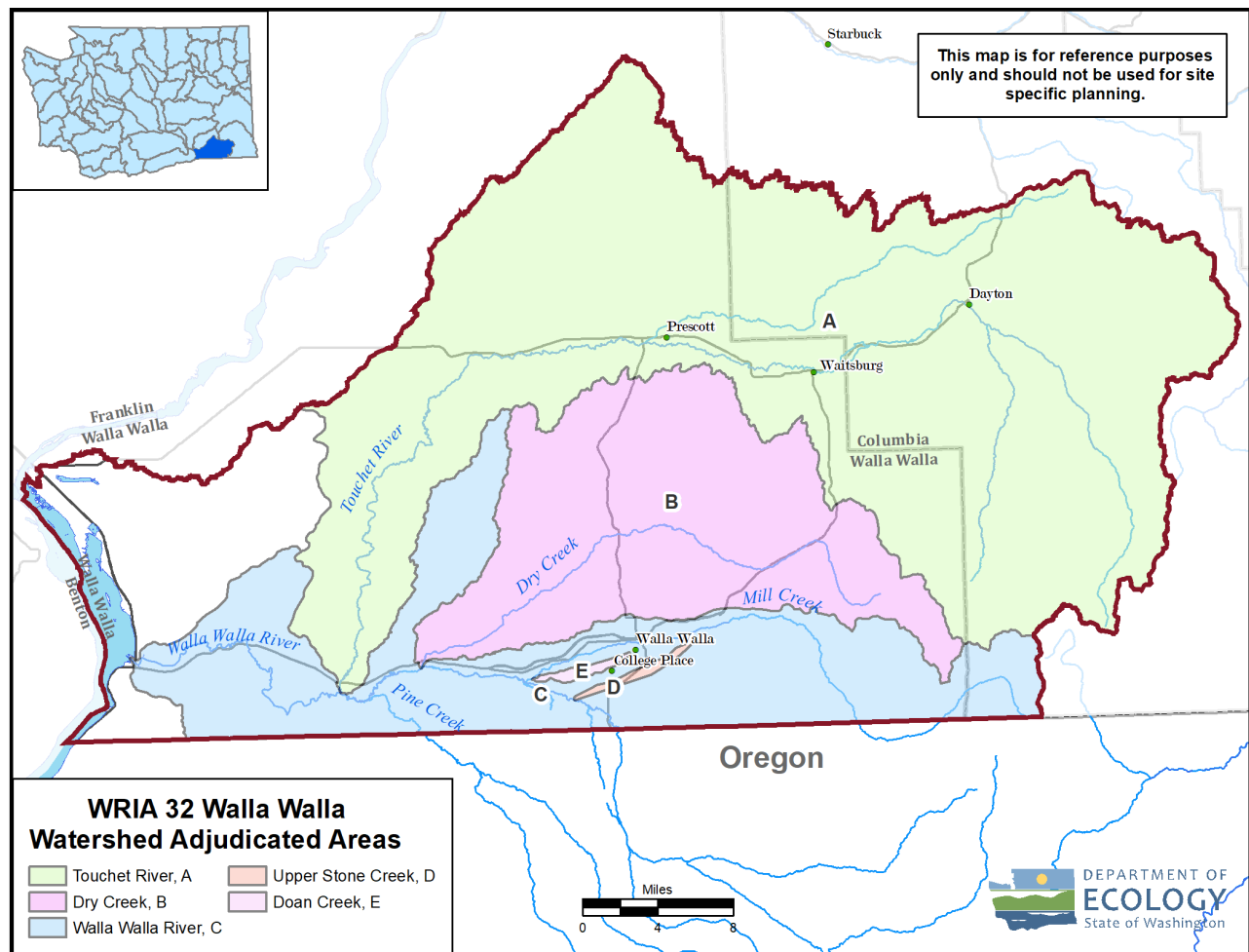
Only environmental enhancement projects may receive a permit to divert surface water during non-closure periods.¹

Existing water rights

Water rights have been issued in the Walla Walla Watershed for over 100 years, and as a result, most water in the watershed is already legally spoken for or “appropriated.”

Numerous adjudications have taken place in the basin. Prior adjudications are an indication that most, if not all, of the available water has already been allocated.

Adjudicated subbasins include: Doan Creek, Dry Creek, Upper Stone Creek, Touchet River, and the Walla Walla River.



¹ [WAC 173-532-055](http://wac.wa.gov/wac173-532-055)

Potential new supplies

Charged with the aggressive pursuit of new water supplies for the Columbia River Basin, Ecology's Office of Columbia River (OCR) implements a range of water development projects and programs that provide secure and reliable water supplies. For up to date information on available water supplies developed through OCR, refer to [Eastern Washington water projects](#).

Summary

Increasing demands for water over time, from ongoing population growth, agriculture, and other consumptive uses as well as associated land use practices, have resulted in lower streamflows and declining groundwater levels in some areas. These decreases have impacted important resources for fisheries and general stream health. The impacts of climate change in WRIA 32 are also yet to be fully realized. However, it is apparent that water availability is limited throughout the Walla Walla Watershed.

Options for Acquiring Water

The gravel aquifers in the basin are closed to all further consumptive appropriation, except new permit exempt groundwater withdrawals as prescribed in WAC 173-532-050.

Permit-exempt options

Basalt aquifer

The following groundwater uses, exempt from permitting under RCW 90.44.050, are available from wells accessing bedrock:

- Single or group domestic uses, not exceeding 5,000 gallons per day (gpd).
- Irrigation of up to a half-acre of non-commercial lawn or garden.
- Industrial purposes (such as water for a store, restaurant, or small industrial facility, or irrigation of a small commercial farm), not exceeding 5,000 gpd.
- Stockwater to provide drinking water for stock animals. Other stock-related purposes (such as washdown of a milking parlor or irrigation for growing hay for stock animals) may require a water right permit.

A project proposal is also limited to the use of one exemption for each type of use, so a housing subdivision, for example, cannot use a series of wells to exceed the 5,000 gpd limit or the half-acre of non-commercial lawn and garden. The entire subdivision, collectively, cannot exceed either limitation.

Gravel aquifer

Connecting to a municipal supply²: New permit-exempt uses from the closed gravel aquifers are allowed only where connection to an existing municipal water supply cannot be provided in a timely and reasonable manner.

² [WAC 173-532-050](#)

Stock watering³: New use of the groundwater permit exemption for stock watering from the gravel aquifers is limited by the legal lot size of record:

- Up to 700 gpd on lots 10 acres or less.
- Up to 2,500 gpd on lots between 10 and 20 acres.
- Up to 5,000 gpd on lots 20 acres or larger.

High density areas⁴ are those areas zoned one or more residence(s) per ten acres. In high density areas all new uses of the groundwater permit exemption must install and maintain a water source meter and report their monthly water use for May through November by the end of each calendar year.

In high density areas (excluding the Burbank area):

- New use of the groundwater permit exemption from the gravel aquifer is restricted to domestic indoor and outdoor uses, and stock watering.
- New domestic permit exempt wells-constructed into the gravel aquifer are limited in use to the following:⁵
 - Maximum daily withdrawal for in-house and outdoor use (excluding stock water) is not to exceed 1,250 gallons per day per residence.
 - A group domestic use is further limited to 5,000 gpd.
 - Any outdoor use of water under the exemption must be mitigated prior to that use.⁶

Burbank area and non-high density areas: Excluding stock watering, permit-exempt groundwater uses from the gravel aquifer may occur consistent with the requirements of RCW 90.44.050 in the area that drains to the Snake and Columbia rivers (Burbank area), and in areas not designated as high-density.

Permit options

If your project cannot access water from an existing water purveyor and doesn't qualify for use of a permit-exempt well, you will need to:

- Apply for **and receive** a new water right, or
- Acquire an existing water right and apply for **and be approved** for a change or transfer for the new use, new point of withdrawal/diversion, and/or new place of use.



Ecology asks anyone who needs a water right (new, change, or transfer) to submit the pre-application consultation form and meet with us to review your water supply needs and project proposal. See the [Resources](#) section for links to forms and other information.

³ under WAC 173-532(4)

⁴ WAC 173-532-050(5)

⁵ WAC 173-532-050(2)

⁶ WAC 173-532-050(6)

New water right

Attempting to acquire new water rights within areas regulated with either instream flows or closures will likely be a very difficult and expensive process. It requires the hiring of qualified professionals and submitting a comprehensive mitigation and monitoring plan. This does not guarantee approval of a water right. Mitigation can be any action or group of actions that address, in-time and in-place, the impact of the water withdrawal or diversion on instream flows or other senior water rights.

Surface and groundwater permits may be issued in both closed areas and areas with instream flow regulations if any one of the three following conditions applies:

1. The proposed water use is non-consumptive.⁷
2. The proposed groundwater use is from the basalt aquifer, and will not:
 - a. Impair existing water rights;
 - b. Affect any closed surface source where instream flows have not been established; and
 - c. Affect any closed gravel aquifer.
3. The proposed surface water use occurs only during non-closure periods and is intended for an environmental enhancement project.⁸

Change or transfer an existing water right

It can be easier to buy an existing water right and change the purpose and/or place of use. It is important that the water right be in good standing by regular use over its lifetime. Changing either of these aspects of a water right can be challenging if the change creates a new or different impact on a stream. Please consider consulting with your regional Ecology staff prior to purchasing an existing right to discuss any potential risks.

Processing options

The wait for your water right application to be processed can be years. Options to speed up the process:

- Submit your new or change water right application through the [Cost Reimbursement Program](#).
- Process your change application through the Walla Walla Water Conservancy Board.

For more information on these and other options, refer to [Alternatives for Water Right Application Processing](#).

You can discuss all of your options to supply water to your project at your pre-application consultation with Ecology. To schedule, submit the [pre-application consultation form](#).

Mitigation refers to measures taken to prevent any impact on streamflow during the period that water is not available, by either:

- Halting the diversion or withdrawal, or
- Replacing the water taken—in time and in-place.

A common form of mitigation is to retire an existing water right upstream from the new use.

⁷ [WAC 173-532-045](#)

⁸ As defined in [WAC 173-532-020\(6\)](#) and meeting the criteria listed in [WAC 173-532-055](#).

Resources

Contact information

Ecology Eastern Regional Office
4601 N. Monroe
Spokane, WA 99205-1295
Phone: 509-329-3400

More information

Visit our website for the most current information.
ecology.wa.gov/Water-Shorelines/Water-supply

Publications and forms are searchable in the
online database.

ecology.wa.gov/publications



Forms

- [Water Right Pre-Application Consultation form](https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/publications/summarypages/ecy070440.html), Form ECY 070-440
<https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/publications/summarypages/ecy070440.html>
- [Application for a New Water Right](https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/publications/summarypages/ecy040114.html), Form ECY 040-114
<https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/publications/summarypages/ecy040114.html>
- [Application to Change or Transfer a Water Right or Claim](https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/publications/summarypages/ecy040197.html), Form ECY 040-197
<https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/publications/summarypages/ecy040197.html>

Publications

- [Cost Reimbursement Program](https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/publications/SummaryPages/2211022.html), Publication 22-11-022
<https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/publications/SummaryPages/2211022.html>
- [Alternatives for Water Right Application Processing](https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/publications/summarypages/1111067.html), Publication 11-11-067
<https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/publications/summarypages/1111067.html>
- Focus on: [The Groundwater Permit Exemption](https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/publications/SummaryPages/1911090.html), Publication 19-11-090
<https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/publications/SummaryPages/1911090.html>

Website – ecology.wa.gov

- Visit the [water rights permits page](https://ecology.wa.gov/WaterRightPermits) for more information and helpful links.
<https://ecology.wa.gov/WaterRightPermits>
- Use the [Water Rights Search](https://ecology.wa.gov/WaterRightsSearch) to locate and research water rights on land parcels anywhere in the state.
<https://ecology.wa.gov/WaterRightsSearch>
- Learn more about the work being done by our [Office of Columbia River](https://ecology.wa.gov/OCR).
<https://ecology.wa.gov/OCR>

ADA accommodations

The Department of Ecology is committed to providing people with disabilities access to information and services by meeting or exceeding the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Section 504 and 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, and Washington State Policy #188.

To request an ADA accommodation, contact Ecology by phone at 360-407-6872, or visit <https://ecology.wa.gov/accessibility>. For Relay Service or TTY call 711 or 877-833-6341.

Map

