

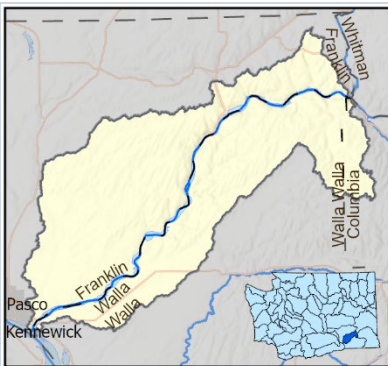
# WRIA 33 Lower Snake Watershed Water Availability



Snake River near Heller Bar, photo by Jaime Short

## Overview

- Introduction to WRIA 33
- Water Availability Factors
- Options for Acquiring Water
- Resources
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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 33

The Lower Snake Watershed or Water Resource Inventory Area (WRIA) 33 is defined as the area that drains to the lower segment of the Snake River, between its confluences with the Palouse River and the Columbia. It is located in the southeastern corner of Washington State, in southern Franklin County, northern Walla Walla County, and the northwestern corner of Columbia County.

### 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.



See *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 77.57](#): Fishways, Flow, and Screening
- [RCW 90.54](#): Water Resources Act of 1971
- [WAC 173-531A](#): The Instream Flow Rule for John Day-McNary Pools Reach
- [WAC 173-563](#): The Instream Flow Rule for the main stem Columbia River in Washington State
- [WAC 508-14](#): Columbia Basin Project

## 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 Lower Snake Watershed, key factors affecting water availability include:

- Area climate.
- Existing water rights.
- Columbia Basin Project.
- Source limitations.

### Precipitation

The annual precipitation in the Lower Snake Watershed ranges from 8 inches per year near its confluence with Columbia River, to a little over 10 inches in the higher elevations. Only a fraction of this precipitation becomes groundwater. 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.

### Existing water rights

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

### Columbia Basin Project

The Columbia Basin Project (CBP) is a federally authorized project with multiple purposes: irrigation, power production, flood control, municipal water supply, recreation, and fish and wildlife benefits. The CBP canal system provides water for much of the agricultural irrigation in the western portion of WRIA 33. Water is imported from the Columbia River and is redistributed through canals. The CBP has three distinct subareas: Quincy, Odessa and the “508-14.”

A portion of the “508-14” subarea, established under WAC 508-14 is located within the southwestern area of WRIA 33. This area is characterized by natural groundwater and a significant quantity of artificially stored groundwater leaking from the CBP project.

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## Source Limitations

This watershed has administrative restrictions known as Surface Water Source Limitations (SWSLs), which limit most water sources in the watershed. This determination comes from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife that flows be protected to maintain fish populations.

## 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 33 are also yet to be fully realized. However, it is apparent that water availability is limited throughout the Lower Snake Watershed.



## Options for Acquiring Water

### Permit-exempt options

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State law, RCW 90.44.050, exempts the following groundwater uses from the water right permitting process:

- 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 no matter how many wells are drilled.

There is no exemption from permitting for surface water diversions.

## Permit options

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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 receive** 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.

### New water right

Attempting to acquire new water rights within areas regulated with either SWSL's, instream flows or closures or groundwater declines will likely be a very difficult and expensive process. It may involve the hiring of qualified professionals and submitting a comprehensive mitigation and monitoring plan. This does not guarantee approval of a water right. Mitigation may be required to address, in-time and in-place, the impact of the water withdrawal or diversion on instream flows or other senior water rights.

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.

The lower seven miles of the Snake River below Ice Harbor dam is subject to WAC 173-563. Water may be available through the Office of Columbia River mitigation program. You should discuss options through the pre application process with Ecology

Projects proposing non-consumptive uses of water may be approvable in both closed areas and areas with instream flow regulations.

### Change or transfer an existing water right

It can be easier to buy an existing water right and change the place of use, the point of diversion or withdrawal, or the purpose or manner of use. Changing aspects of a water right can be challenging if the change creates a new or different impact on a stream. It is important that the water right be in good standing by regular use over its lifetime.

### 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 Franklin or Walla Walla County Water Conservancy Board.

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

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

## Resources

### Contact Information

Ecology Eastern Region Office  
4601 North Monroe St  
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](https://ecology.wa.gov/Water-Shorelines/Water-supply)

Publications and forms are searchable in the online database. [ecology.wa.gov/publication](https://ecology.wa.gov/publication)

### 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](https://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>

### 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

