

WRIA 34 Palouse Watershed Water Availability



Palouse Falls

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Introduction to WRIA 34

The Palouse Watershed or Water Resource Inventory Area (WRIA) 34 is defined as the area within Washington state that drains to the Palouse River. It is located in southeastern Washington, covering most of Whitman County, and smaller portions of Adams, Spokane, Lincoln, and Franklin counties.

The Palouse River originates in the mountains of Idaho. The Palouse River’s major tributaries are Cow, Rock, Union Flat, and Willow creeks; and the river empties into the Snake River.

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



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.

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
- [RCW 77.57](#): Fishways, Flow, and Screening
- [WAC 173-128A](#) and [WAC 173-130A](#): Odessa groundwater management

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 Palouse Watershed, key factors affecting water availability include:

- Climate, geology, and hydrology.
- Existing water rights.
- Columbia Basin Project.
- Source limitations.

Climate, geology, and hydrology

The annual precipitation in the Palouse Watershed ranges from 10 inches per year near its confluence with Snake River, to a little over 20 inches in the higher elevations along the Idaho border. Most of the precipitation arrives during the winter months, when water demands are the lowest. Due to extensive bedrock, only a small fraction of this precipitation becomes groundwater.

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.

In addition, many areas of groundwater are in decline, including the West Plains plateau, southwest of the Spokane River; and the Palouse Basin Aquifer covering most of the east portion of the watershed around the towns of Pullman, Washington and Moscow, Idaho. These areas are considered over-appropriated, and no further water is available for new uses.

Existing water rights

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

Cow Creek and Sprague Lake subbasins have been adjudicated within WRIA 34. Prior adjudications are an indication that most, if not all, of the available water has already been allocated.

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 surrounding watersheds. 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 Odessa subarea¹ is located within the western edge of WRIA 34. The majority of this subarea has not been developed with imported water and is often referred to as the second half of the CBP. Groundwater levels in the Odessa subarea are declining rapidly in many places and as a result, groundwater is not available for new uses.

Source limitations

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

From June 15 to September 1, the following are closed to new consumptive uses:

- Badger Lake
- Cache Creek
- Cottonwood Creek
- Downing Creek
- Four Mile Creek
- Imbler Creek
- Packer Creek
- Palouse River
- Paradise Creek
- Pine Creek
- Rebel Flat Creek
- Rock Creek
- Thorn Creek
- Union Flat Creek

In addition, Silver Lake is closed to new appropriations year-round. These restrictions further indicate that most water has been appropriated within the watershed.

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 existing rights, cities, and towns, and important resources for fisheries and general stream health. The impacts of climate change in WRIA 34 are also yet to be fully realized. However, it is apparent that water availability is limited throughout the Palouse Watershed.

¹ Established under WACs 173-128A and 173-130A

Options for Acquiring Water

Permit-exempt options

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

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 with limited water availability will likely be a very difficult and expensive process. It can require 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.

Projects proposing non-consumptive uses of water may be approvable without mitigation.

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 an appropriate Water Conservancy Board, depending on the location of the proposal. Five Boards overlay WRIA 34.

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](#).

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.

Resources

Contact Information

Ecology Eastern Regional 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

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 the Columbia River](https://ecology.wa.gov/About-us/Who-we-are/Our-Programs/Office-of-Columbia-River).
<https://ecology.wa.gov/About-us/Who-we-are/Our-Programs/Office-of-Columbia-River>

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

