

Focus on: Drought Response Capacity



WHY IT MATTERS

Recent droughts created hardships to farmers, ranchers, and rural landowners that lost access to water. In addition, drought was responsible for excessive water temperatures that killed hundreds of thousands of salmon, sturgeon, and other fish and wildlife. Ensuring Ecology can respond more effectively is critical with anticipated increased frequency of droughts in the future.

ADA Accessibility

To request an ADA accommodation, contact Ecology by phone at 360-407-6831 or email at ecyadacoordinator@ecy.wa.gov, or visit <https://ecology.wa.gov/accessibility>. For Relay Service or TTY call 711 or 877-833-6341

Proposed Legislation

Ecology's *Drought Response Capacity* legislation provides permanent funding for drought planning and preparation to increase our state's resilience to drought. In addition, the proposal authorizes funding for Ecology to be available when a drought is declared so that we can respond immediately. Under this proposal, Ecology will have the capacity and the tools needed that enable us to address drought hardships more effectively when they occur.

The problem

Droughts in 2019 and 2021 rapidly increased in severity late in the spring despite healthy snowpack conditions, leaving no time for adequate planning, preparation, and funding. In 2021, drought conditions accompanied a severe heat event that occurred after the legislative session adjourned, so there was no funding appropriated by legislature for drought response. This created significant hardships with little agency capacity to address those hardships.

Drought frequency and severity has increased in recent years. Climate change models predict more frequent and severe droughts in Washington. In recent droughts, stream flows decreased and stream temperatures increased, killing thousands of threatened and endangered salmonids and other species. In addition, reduced water supplies destroyed or damaged crops and forage for ranchers. Some rural drinking water supplies literally dried up, requiring water to be hauled in by trucks to meet even basic sanitation needs for the affected small communities. To be resilient to climate change, Washington needs additional drought response capacity and a more effective approach to drought response.

The solution

The state needs ongoing and readily available funding to prepare and respond to drought emergencies, including unanticipated and sudden droughts. As well, the state needs to authorize Ecology to respond more quickly when droughts are declared. In many situations, preparation and timely response can solve problems before hardships become severe.

Ecology's proposal

A new non-appropriated account would be created that allows Ecology to fund drought response actions immediately after a drought emergency is declared.

In addition, three million dollars for drought planning and preparation will requested in the FY 23-25 biennium, and in each biennium thereafter. Ecology would fund drought planning and preparation activities by local and state entities through grants issued.

How it will benefit Washington

Washington currently lacks consistent statewide funding for drought preparedness and response. Our state will benefit from improved drought planning and preparation provided by the ongoing, stable source of funding. More planning and preparation is essential in face of predicted increased droughts due to climate change. With additional funding, communities and agricultural users will have more reliable supplies, and actions can be taken that result in more cool, clean water for streams needed to support salmonids and other fish and wildlife.

In addition, as we have seen in the past several years, we cannot reliably depend on legislative appropriations to support emergency drought response that may be needed after the end of legislative session. Recent years highlight the challenge of predicting droughts based solely on winter snowpack. Enabling Ecology to respond immediately when drought is declared will provide for more effective and timely actions to mitigate drought hardships.

Figure 1. Washington's snowpack levels, April 2021. Source: USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

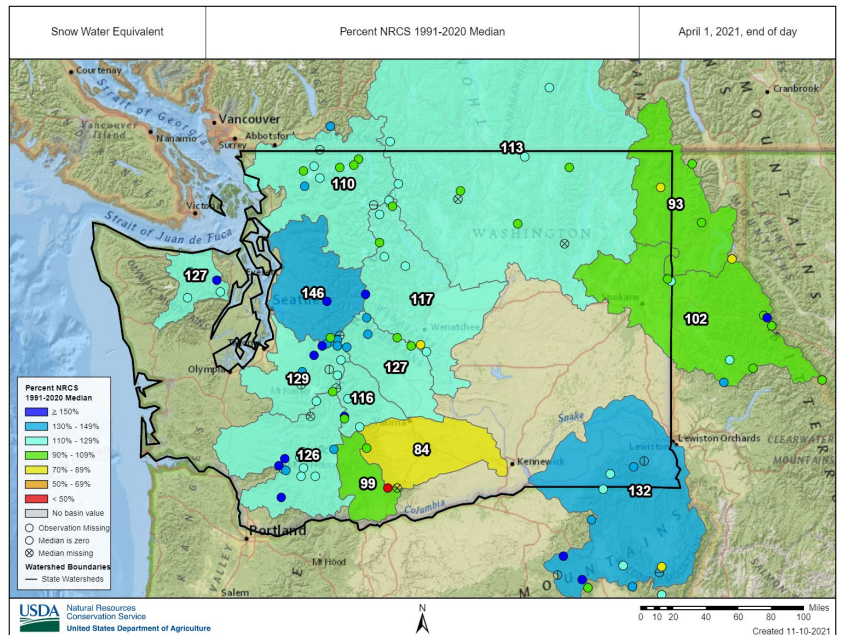


Figure 2. Washington's drought declaration areas, July 2021.



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