

Focus on: Office of Chehalis Basin reappropriations



The Skookumchuck River meanders through forests and farm land in the Chehalis River Basin.

Why it matters



Catastrophic 2007 Basin flood closed I-5.

During the last 30 years, five of the Chehalis Basin's largest historical floods have occurred.

More information

chehalisbasinstrategy.com

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Reducing Basin flood damage, restoring aquatic habitat

The 2016 Legislature created the Office of Chehalis Basin (OCB) within Ecology to pursue an integrated strategy to reduce long-term flood damage while restoring important aquatic species habitat in the Chehalis River Basin. Lawmakers also established the Chehalis Basin Board to oversee how the Strategy is funded and carried out. Since the OCB was created, the Legislature has appropriated \$133.2 million, of which about \$23 million has been spent to date on local projects throughout the Basin. These funds, along with previous Chehalis Basin Strategy appropriations, have:

- Established evacuation routes and early flood warning systems.
- Protected homes, businesses, and critical infrastructure such as roads, sewers, water supplies, and wastewater treatment plants.
- Installed raised farm pads at 26 Basin locations to safeguard farms, livestock, and farm equipment.
- Corrected dozens of fish passage barriers opening up more than 100 miles of habitat in the watershed for salmon and steelhead, including over 55 miles for spring Chinook salmon.
- Advanced about 50 other habitat restoration projects.

Reappropriations built in to Strategy's basin-wide scale

Chehalis Basin Strategy activities aim to reduce long-term flood damages and improve aquatic species habitat at a basin-wide scale. Due to the large-scale, transformative nature of taking a basin-wide approach, planning, design, and construction of inter-related projects are often highly complex. For participants to initially commit, they often need assurance they can receive full funding to complete their projects. As a result, we expect some amount of reappropriation request every funding cycle.

Projects help residents, salmon



These barrier culverts on Bush Creek near Elma have been replaced, opening 8.2 miles of forested habitat for fish.

When entities apply for OCB funding, they provide a rough project timeline and an ideal schedule. Since many Basin flood damage reduction and aquatic species habitat restoration projects are located in environmentally-sensitive areas with narrow work windows, many OCB projects take longer to complete than the state two-year budget cycle.

Table 1: OCB reappropriations

Biennium	Fund	Original amount (in millions)	2019-21 reappropriation (in millions & percent remaining)
2017-19	SBCA	\$50	\$23 / 46%
2017-19	GF-Fed ¹	\$10	\$10 / 100%
2019-21	SBCA	\$73.2	N/A

¹In 2017-19, we received \$10 million in General Fund-Federal (GF-F) spending authority to support anticipated federal grant funding. In 2019, we received notice OCB was selected for a FEMA pre-disaster mitigation grant, but funding has been delayed.

At the end of the 2017-19 biennium, \$23 million was reappropriated to the current biennium. As of December 2020, 100% of the reappropriations are either spent (53%) or under contract (47%).

Why Office of Chehalis Basin seeks reappropriations

Funding for OCB projects historically comes through the State Building Construction Account (SBCA). Projects funded by OCB are typically completed in three to four years, which explains some of the reappropriation requests each biennium. While the reasons we seek reappropriations for individual projects vary, some key reasons include:

The COVID-19 pandemic and the state’s Stay Home, Stay Healthy Proclamations have affected capacity and timing for participation by several local and tribal governments, as well as private contractors working on various Chehalis River Basin flood-damage reduction and aquatic species restoration projects. Coupled with very short in-water work windows, these additional delays have extended many project timelines.

Gov. Inslee directed Ecology to temporarily pause its environmental review of the Chehalis River Basin Flood Control Zone District’s proposal to construct a flood retention facility on the Chehalis River near Pe Ell and make levee improvements at the Chehalis-Centralia Airport. Due to the July 2020 pause, the level of effort anticipated by local, state, and tribal governments, and private contractors to develop a final state environmental impact statement was significantly reduced.

The Governor also directed the Chehalis Basin Board to re-examine the Flood District’s proposal, including taking more time to evaluate opportunities to avoid, minimize, or offset the impacts of the proposed project and to assess additional flood-damage reduction alternatives that don’t include a dam. The Board is set to deliver its recommendations, including a final 2021-23 proposed biennial budget and project list, by the end of March 2021.

How we’re addressing slower OCB project spending

We know several early action habitat restoration and local flood-damage reduction projects are going to need more than one state fiscal biennium to complete.

Beginning with our 2017-19 appropriation request, we revised the project evaluation and grant selection process to consider only projects that are ready to proceed and be completed within two to three years. For the \$73.2 million included in the Governor’s 2019-21 capital budget, we continued with this same approach.

We are actively working with other agencies and tribes, conservation districts, local floodplain managers, and our non-profit partners to evaluate ways to help expedite spending. This includes helping build implementation capacity within the Basin, considering procedures that would break large-scale, multi-biennia projects into discrete phases to be completed over time, and evaluating a portfolio approach that will enable us to move multiple, similar projects forward concurrently as they are ready to proceed from one phase to the next. We are also working to identify and reduce permit process challenges and other obstacles.