

Focus on: Drought Response Capacity

HB 1138



WHY IT MATTERS

Recent droughts created hardships to farmers, ranchers, and small communities. Extreme river temperatures from drought killed hundreds of thousands of salmon and sturgeon. This proposal provides resources for drought planning and preparation that will help our communities develop resiliency to impacts from climate change, while also providing resources for Ecology to respond more effectively to droughts when they occur.

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* legislative proposal establishes permanent funding for drought planning and preparation to improve resiliency to the effects of climate change. This proposal also authorizes funding for Ecology to take immediate actions when a drought emergency is declared. Under this proposal, Ecology will increase its capacity to partner with irrigators, communities, and fisheries managers to better prepare for drought impacts and to address drought hardships more effectively when they occur.

The problem

Climate change models predict more frequent and severe droughts in Washington in coming decades. Recent droughts have resulted in decreased streamflow and increased stream temperatures, killing hundreds of thousands of salmonids and other aquatic species. Reduced water supplies destroyed or damaged agricultural crops and forage for ranchers. Some rural drinking water supplies literally dried up, requiring water to be hauled in by trucks to meet basic sanitation needs for affected small communities.

Droughts in 2019 and 2021 rapidly increased in severity late in the spring despite healthy snowpack conditions, restricting Ecology's ability to determine emergency response needs and to request funding. In 2021, drought conditions followed a severe heat event that occurred after the legislative session had adjourned for the year, so no funding was appropriated by Legislature for drought response. As a result, the agency had few resources available to address drought hardships and support suffering communities.

The solution

The state needs an ongoing funding commitment for drought planning and preparation, as well as a source of funding immediately available to respond to sudden and unanticipated drought emergencies. A combination of good planning and preparation plus timely response can help resolve issues before drought hardships become severe.

Ecology's proposal

Ecology is requesting ongoing funding of \$2.5 million for drought planning and preparation per biennium. Ecology would use this appropriation to support local and state efforts to improve resiliency to drought. In addition, \$3 million per year would be available to Ecology to fund drought response actions immediately after a drought emergency is declared.

How it will benefit Washington

Ecology developed a drought plan in collaboration with local, state, and federal agencies. One key recommendation in that plan was to ensure a consistent funding source to increase resilience to impacts from climate change. Funding drought planning and preparation projects will enable communities and agricultural users to stabilize access to water supplies before the onset of an emergency while simultaneously protecting the cool, clean water for streams necessary 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 given that drought conditions often occur 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.

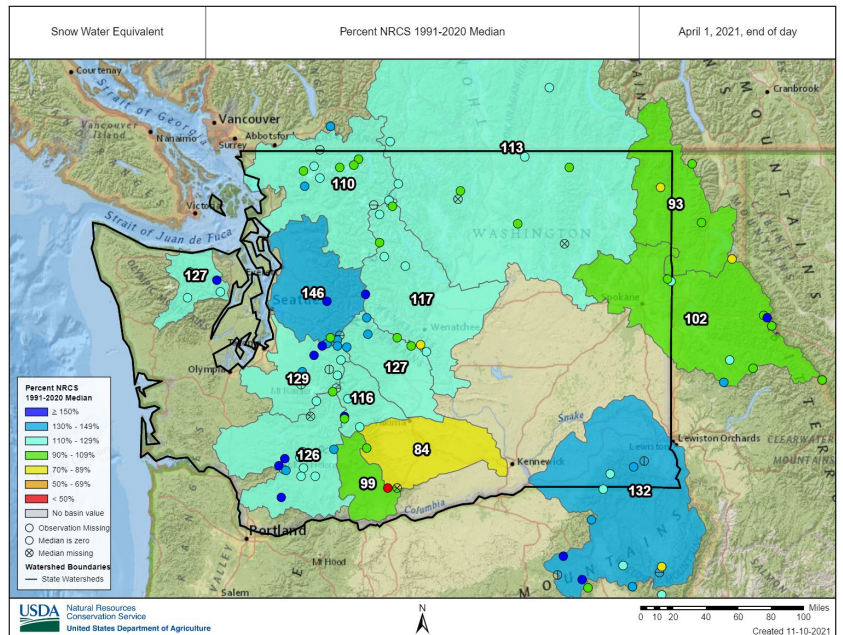


Figure 2. Drought declaration in July 2021 included the entire state, except for central Puget Sound.



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