

Focus on: Walla Walla 2050 Plan

HB 1322/SB 5384



WHY IT MATTERS

The Walla Walla River basin has longstanding water resource management challenges. Some years the river literally runs dry, limiting efforts to restore endangered spring chinook and steelhead runs. Water users are frequently prevented from using their full legal water rights because of water supply conflicts.

This bill will provide clear legislative direction toward implementing a comprehensive long-term water management strategy that improves streamflow conditions and provides reliable future water supplies for farmers, households, and businesses.

Proposed Legislation

Ecology's proposed legislation creates authority to implement the Walla Walla 2050 water management plan (Walla Walla 2050 Plan). The legislation authorizes the development of projects to benefit water supplies to benefit instream resources and out-of-stream uses, provides a framework for funding projects, and directs the department to work with the State of Oregon and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) to develop recommendations for a bi-state governance structure.

The problem

The Walla Walla River basin faces a critical water supply shortage in the face of many competing water supply demands and a changing climate.

The Walla Walla River basin has been overappropriated for more than 100 years – meaning there are more legal rights to use water than there is water available. In some years, the Walla Walla River literally runs dry, which is a significant barrier to restoring endangered spring Chinook salmon and steelhead.

The Legislature passed the Walla Walla pilot water management law in 2008 to address these challenges, but the pilot program expired in 2020 without meeting its goals. Since then, Ecology has taken a leadership role in the development of the Walla Walla 2050 Plan.



Figure 1. Walla Walla River.



Figure 2. Walla Walla Basin.



Figure 3 Wine grapes growing in the Walla Walla basin.

The solution

Significant investments and specific authorities are needed to implement the Walla Walla 2050 Plan. Implementing the plan will improve streamflow conditions to achieve state and tribal fisheries objectives while continuing to protect senior water right holders' rights to a reliable water supply.

Legislative authorization is required to plan and develop physical infrastructure to improve water supplies, a governance structure to manage water supplies, and a process for engaging local stakeholders to inform management options.

Ecology's proposal

Our legislative proposal would address the specific issues and needs found in the Walla Walla basin, including:

- Establish conjunctive water management goals to reconcile surface and ground water uses, and improve streamflows;
- Authorize the development of water supply projects that benefit Washington to be constructed in either Washington and Oregon;
- Ensure stakeholder input and transparency; and
- Provide clear direction to develop a governance structure involving Oregon, Washington, and Tribes.

How it will benefit Washington

This legislation supports the Walla Walla 2050 Plan with essential improvements to Walla Walla River stream flows, supporting the recovery of endangered species and economically important fisheries. Implementation of the Walla Walla 2050 Plan will result in more reliable water supplies for farmers, homeowners and businesses.

More information

The Walla Walla Water 2050 Strategic Plan can be found at:

<https://ecology.wa.gov/Water-Shorelines/Water-supply/Water-supply-projects-EW/Walla-Walla-2050>

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