

Columbia River Drought Insurance Program



Program description

Nearly 400 interruptible water right holders are at risk of being shut off during the next Columbia River drought. To prevent that, the Legislature tasked Ecology with developing new water supplies for these users on the Columbia River mainstem.

The Columbia River Drought Insurance Program is one of several strategies to meet this legislative directive by providing reliable access to water during droughts.

What you should know

There are no premiums or fees.

The only cost is the price of leasing water. This would only happen if the Columbia River is in a drought *and* the water right holder chooses to lease water. This program is one tool to “insure” against the hardships of future droughts. Unlike car insurance, there are no premiums.

The program is in the early stages of development.

Our current priority is gathering public feedback as we determine how the program can best serve interruptible users. Many decisions about how to run the program will be brought before the Columbia River Policy Advisory Group, and there will be additional opportunities for input.

The program is voluntary.

Interruptible water right holders can choose to participate. No one is required to lease water unless they want to.

How it works

The program provides water for interruptible users to lease during a Columbia River drought, which would otherwise force those users to shut off. The program does not provide water to buy now.

Leasable water includes 33,000 ac-ft from the Lake Roosevelt Incremental Storage and Release Program. We have not yet added banked water to the program, since we are still evaluating what will work best.

How it helps

Columbia River droughts happen roughly once every 20 years. The last one was in 2001. When drought happens, interruptible water right holders are required to shut off to avoid impairing senior water rights. This program gives them an option to continue using water during droughts.

Without this program and Ecology’s other efforts to develop water supplies in the Columbia Basin, future droughts could cost hundreds of millions in higher electricity rates and damage to agriculture.

Next steps

Even once it’s implemented, the program can be modified to respond to a changing environment and changing needs. We have been and are continuing to contact the hundreds of water right holders eligible for the program. Their feedback helps ensure it works best for them.

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