

Status of Washington State Water/Irrigated Agriculture: Major Legislative, Administrative, Local/Private Sector Initiatives

The following summary information, table, and charts highlight the status of key water and irrigated agriculture initiatives in Washington. The initiatives reflect statewide and more basin-specific actions, with the attached status table displaying which initiatives will require Legislative action (new legislation) or funding within the 2008-2012 period.

General Statewide Area:

- Water Conservancy Boards, Water Right Changes/Transfers:
 - Water Conservancy Boards function on a county-level basis, and they have authority to approve surface and groundwater right changes/transfers. This is perhaps the most industrious, real-time water right activity in the state.
- Water Irrigation Guide Update:
 - The WA State Irrigation Guide (WIG) is being updated by Ecology. The WIG includes estimates of water demand crop duties for multiple sites within the state. The WIG is used by Ecology and the Water Boards to establish water right beneficial use estimates (along with water application efficiency applications). It is an important water management tool.
- Water Right Adjudications:
 - Water right adjudications determine the extent and validity of water rights, and adjudications have been/are taking place throughout the state (see attached chart). Future adjudications have been requested in both Eastern and Western Washington. One of the more famous adjudication proceedings is the Yakima Basin Adjudication, being completed after about twenty-years of review by a special Superior Court.
- Water Right Relinquishment Code Changes:
 - Washington agricultural interests have proposed changes to the water right relinquishment statutes for the past fifteen years. The “Big R” changes affect water right amounts, period of use over time, and exemptions for non-use. Most water right holders believe that the current code is too restrictive, forcing relinquishment or “de facto” relinquishment, and actually discouraging water conservation.

General Statewide Area, Sub-Basins and Tributaries:

- Watershed Planning:
 - Local watershed planning received formal legislative endorsement and support in 1998, and it addresses water demand, supply, and environmental issues. Many of the state watershed plans have been completed, and their specific action items are being initiated, where feasible (see attached chart).
 - To date, watershed planning has received significant attention in areas like the Walla Walla Basin and Skagit Valley.
- In-stream Flow Rules:
 - In-stream flow rules (regulation setting) are often closely attached to watershed planning, and rule making has been active in both the Walla Walla Basin and Skagit Valley. Other basins are undergoing rule making at this time (see attached chart). Depending on the site-specific conditions, regulation can affect both surface and groundwater sources.

Yakima River Basin:

- Yakima Basin Water Supply Formulation (Feasibility) Studies and EIS:
 - The recent history of the review for new storage in the Yakima Basin revolves around the USBR-Ecology Water Supply Formulation Studies, including feasibility studies and on-going EIS. This work has evaluated several options, including new reservoir proposals for Black Rock or Wymer sites. This work is expected to produce a preferred alternative for further review by January 2009.

Columbia-Snake River System:

- Columbia River Water Management Program (CRWMP), RCW 90.90:
 - The CRWMP is the result of about fifteen years of administrative turmoil, litigation, and what was known as the Columbia River Initiative. It seeks to provide additional mainstem Columbia River water rights, while protecting in-stream environmental values.
 - The Lake Roosevelt drawdown is the first major action of the 2006 RCW 90.90 legislation—it provides 30,000 acre-ft. of water for the Oddessa Sub-Basin Area, and about 33,000 acre-ft. of water for relief of mainstem water right interruption.

- Several alternatives (water supply and distribution projects) are being reviewed to provide water to the Odessa Sub-Basin Area.
 - The Columbia-Snake River Irrigators Association and Ecology have entered into a Voluntary Regional Agreement (VRA) to use conservation and water management actions to protect existing and to develop new water rights.
- Columbia River Flow Regime—NOAA Fisheries Biological Opinion.
 - Per Federal Court direction, the NOAA Fisheries has revised its Federal Hydro Project and Water Management Biological Opinion (BiOp). The BiOp sets policy “flow targets” for fish protection, and is considered highly controversial by all river users and affected parties.

Columbia-Snake River System—Other State/Local Actions:

- Technical Water Management Actions:
 - Per direction and funding under RCW 90.90, Ecology is preparing Columbia Basin water supply and demand studies, GIS-descriptions of water rights, and requiring all mainstem Columbia-Snake River water right holders to submit annual water usage data.
- Legislative Proposals:
 - New proposed legislation has been submitted allowing for changes to water right points of diversions within mainstem pools.
 - New proposed legislation has been submitted allowing for new water rights to be issued, tied to the production of new bio-fuel or organic crops.
 - New legislation will be proposed in 2009 allowing water right holders to avoid relinquishment of O&M conservation water, and for use as new water rights.