



Focus on Governor Locke's Columbia River Initiative

from the Department of Ecology

The Columbia River Initiative is a proposed water-management program for the Columbia River that:

- Allows the basin's economy to grow, diversify and be sustained.
- Reflects scientifically sound information.
- Reduces the risks to fish and maintains healthy watersheds.

The proposal offers a pragmatic and responsible approach for securing water in a timely and affordable manner to:

- Address water needs during drought years.
- Provide water for new municipal, industrial and irrigation uses.
- Improve stream flows for fish.

The proposal also provides funding to develop future storage capabilities and water conservation measures, and to acquire water.

Background

Since early 2001, the state of Washington has been developing a program that would allow additional water to be diverted from the Columbia River for off-stream uses that support the state's economy without harming endangered salmon runs.

The state has hundreds of applications for new state water rights from the Columbia River, and many of these applications have been pending for over a decade. Several of the communities along the river do not have adequate or reliable water rights for growth or economic development. State water rights issued since 1980 are subject to interruption during periods of low river flows (as during the drought of 2001).

A report prepared by the National Academy of Sciences cautioned the state about allowing new water withdrawals from the Columbia River during low-flow periods. At the same time, a report from the University of Washington predicted new withdrawals could result in substantial economic growth for the region.

Elements of the Columbia River Initiative

The four elements of the Columbia River Initiative package include the following.

- 1) **Negotiated agreements**, the first with the Bureau of Reclamation and Columbia Basin irrigation districts to supply water to cities near the Columbia – including Richland, Kennewick, Pasco and West Richland – and to bring irrigation water to farmers whose wells are drying up because the Odessa aquifer is declining. It also will provide a reliable supply of water for farms and businesses during future droughts along the mainstem Columbia River and provide water to improve streamflows for fish. Another agreement has been reached with the Colville Tribes to



address the effects of water to be released from Lake Roosevelt. The state will continue to work on other agreements with the BPA, the Corps of Engineers and others to secure additional water.

- 2) An **executive-request bill** allowing for full legislative consideration of this approach and establishing the key policy parameters for the Columbia River program. It calls for:
 - Directing that two-thirds of water acquired by the state be made available to offset new water uses.
 - Holding one-third of water acquired by the state to improve stream flows for fish.
 - Directing the Department of Ecology to issue permits for new water use to offset the effects during the April through August time period. .
- 3) **Capital and operating budget requests** of \$79 million over the next 10 years to secure water and to conduct feasibility evaluations of new off-channel storage projects.
- 4) A **draft rule** (proposed by the Department of Ecology) to implement the policy bill. It includes:
 - Procedures for drought permits for existing water rights that are currently subject to interruption during low stream flows.
 - Setting the cost to be paid annually by new water-right holders to obtain water from the state.
 - Defining responsibilities for acquiring, accounting for, and approving the allocation of water from the Columbia River mainstem.

Over the next 20 years, this package could generate a net benefit to the Eastern Washington economy of \$186 million and up to 9,000 new jobs while also improving the outlook for fish.

For more information

All information on the Columbia River Initiative is available online, including copies of the water agreements, policy bill, legislative budget request and the draft rule. Please visit Ecology's Web site at www.ecy.wa.gov. Click on **Quick Links** (index bar on the left of the web page) and go to **Columbia R. Initiative**. The Academy of Sciences study and University of Washington economics study also can be found on the Web site.