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Editorial

There isn't as much water as we may think

For all its seeming abundance in the Skagit River basin, water is a finite resource. We have long taken the availability of this life-giving substance for granted. But no more. It will take a careful balancing act to distribute water equitably to preserve fish, serve agriculture and the growing urban demand.

South of Mount Vernon is a small basin that drains the Carpenter and Fisher creeks. On June 27 the basin was closed to further well drilling for domestic and agricultural use.

The state Department of Ecology declared the basin's ground water supply to be tapped out. No new wells, no new building permits unless new development is supplied with water piped in from the Skagit Public Utility District.

Ecology was applying terms of the minimum flow rule for some 25 creek basins considered to be valuable salmon habitat. The agency and Skagit County government arrived at an agreement in 2006 that regulates water use in those drainages.

Once the limit for water use is reached in a basin, Ecology will close it to new well drilling.

The Carpenter-Fisher basin is the first drainage area in the Skagit River watershed to be closed. It might not be the last.

Ecology is continuing its study of the impact of well pumping on stream flows in 27-square-mile Carpenter-Fisher utilizing data from the U.S. Geological Survey.

The USGS data was used to build a computer model that can be used to study the relationship between groundwater and streams throughout the Skagit watershed.

It is information that is needed to make more informed judgments about our use of well water, especially if we are serious about wanting to support the productivity of Skagit salmon habitat.

The river supports five species of salmon, with runs spread across the calendar. It also accounts for about a third of all salmon emerging from Puget Sound streams.

At certain times of the year — particularly in summer — the Skagit can run below 10,000 cubic feet per second, which is considered a minimum for salmon.

It is ironic that there are other times when we struggle to keep the river from washing over us. The 1990 flood that took out Fir Island levees was estimated at 151,000 cfs.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers estimates that a 100-year flood on the Skagit River would hit 228,000 cfs, although some dispute that figure.

The ability of the river to sustain its salmon runs is heavily dependent on the health of its tributaries where the fish spawn, thus is Ecology's focus on key creek basins.

The Carpenter-Fisher closure calls attention to the limits of our precious water resources as Skagit County doubles in population over the next 50 years.

Editorials reflect the consensus opinion of the editorial board and are written by its members: Publisher L. Stedem Wood and newsroom editors Dick Clever and Colette Weeks. Signed columns reflect the authors' viewpoints.