



Frequently Asked Questions about the Columbia River Water Management Program

from Ecology's Water Resources Program

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Introduction

House Bill 2860 establishes the need for a Columbia River Basin water management program and directs Ecology to aggressively pursue development of water supplies to benefit both instream and out-of-stream uses through storage, conservation and voluntary regional water management agreements. The bill also creates a Columbia River Basin development account.

Q: What will water management on the Columbia River look like under this new legislation?

A: The new legislation provides opportunities for managing the water we have right now in a better way and explores options for storing new water for the future benefit of people and fish. The program seeks to sustain growing communities and a healthy economy, and meet the needs of fish and healthy watersheds for many years to come.

The bill invests in new storage and water conservation projects on the Columbia River and provides a formula for distributing water fairly – getting it to the right place at the right time.

It allows for creativity:

- Groups interested in new water rights can enter into voluntary agreements to develop conservation programs and mitigate for their new uses on the mainstem of the Columbia River
- The state is partnering with the federal government, tribes and other water managers (PUDs, cities, irrigation districts, state agencies, conservation districts, etc.) to find better ways to manage the water systems we have right now
- Those partnerships also are exploring new storage options and conservation projects

Q: What priorities are outlined in the bill?

A: The legislation directs the Department of Ecology to focus its efforts on developing water supplies for the following needs:



- Alternatives to ground water for agricultural users in the Odessa sub-area aquifer
- Sources of water supply for pending water right applications
- A new uninterrupted supply of water for the holders of interruptible water rights on the Columbia River
- New municipal, domestic, industrial and irrigation water needs

The bill also provides a formula for distributing new storage water in support of both in-stream and out-of-stream uses. Two-thirds of newly stored water will be available to support new out-of-stream water uses, while one-third of the water will be reserved for stream flows and fish. Reuse of conserved water and water managed through voluntary regional agreements must be “water-budget neutral” during the months of July and August, when pressure on the resource is greatest on the Columbia River.

Q: What programs or mechanisms will be used to achieve these goals?

A: As time passes, and the evaluation work is completed, more and more construction work will occur. The Legislature has provided \$200 million to develop water supplies for the Columbia Basin and they have an expectation to see that money at work.

- Water managers in the Odessa subarea are already exploring options for delivering surface water (USBR project water) to some of the farmers there.
- Ecology, the Washington Conservation Commission, and other local parties are looking for water savings projects to support.
- Agreements with the USBR, Colville tribe and others are paving the way for additional draws on Lake Roosevelt to support water right holders who now can be interrupted in low water years.
- We’re working to implement at least one Voluntary Regional Agreement. Under a VRA, an application for a new water right is required to find an equal amount of conserved water to offset a proposed new use.

New storage sites are being evaluated and narrowed to a few choices, which will undergo feasibility analysis. And whether additional winter runoff can be stored in existing facilities also is being evaluated.

Q: How will these programs be funded?

A: The legislation provides \$16 million to continue feasibility studies related to off-stream storage development or enhancing existing storage projects, providing surface water to the Odessa subarea and projects that enhance water supplies for the Walla Walla and Yakima rivers through exchanges and other water efficiencies.

The Legislature also authorized the issuance of up to \$200 million in general obligation bonds to support enactment of the Columbia River water development and management program. This is money that is dedicated by law to water supply projects for the Columbia Basin. It cannot be used to fund other state priorities.

Q: What's the agency doing now to get this program up and running?

A: Currently, the Washington Department of Ecology is reaching out to communities, tribes, local governments and stakeholders and asking advice on how to best implement this legislation. People have had the opportunity to learn more about the program during a series of workshops held in May. We're gathering information on what should be included in an Environmental Impact Statement for the Columbia River water management program. Scoping comments will be accepted through June 5, 2006.

In addition, Ecology in consultation with the state Department of Fish and Wildlife and our other partners, has assembled a Columbia River water management implementation team to set up the administrative structure and strategies for accomplishing the many components and milestones outlined in the legislation.

Q: How does this law relate to existing water law? Does it change the state's consultation rule on the Columbia?

A: The legislature was careful to leave the existing consultation rule in place. – As a result, an applicant for a new water right can choose whether to use the process established by the new law or to ask the Department of Ecology to consult with state, federal, and tribal fish agencies as well as local jurisdictions on what effects a water allocation decisions from the Columbia River might have on fish. Mitigation for the new right would then be based upon the outcomes from this consultation.

The legislature was also careful to preserve the requirements of existing water law. As a result, all new water rights, whether covered under the bill or not, will have to pass the 4-Part Test in order for a water right to be issued by Ecology. The 4-Part Test is:

- Is there water available?
- Would the withdrawal impair a senior water right?
- How will the water be put to use?
- Is it in the public interest to put the water to use?

Q: Why is this program needed?

A: Millions of people rely on the resources from the Columbia River – it supplies us energy that powers our homes and businesses, its farmers put food on our tables, its fish and natural beauty provide both recreation and income and are an important legacy for tribes and all residents of the Northwest.

Competition for water continues to escalate. There are hundreds of pending applications in Washington for new water rights from the Columbia. The Columbia River Water Management Program provides a pathway to certainty. It offers a formula for finding near-term solutions and makes a long-term commitment to the region.

Information on this topic can be accessed through Ecology's Web site. The address is:

<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/cwp/crwmp.html>

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