

Honeyford proposes water rights commission

January 21st, 2003

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OLYMPIA -- State Sen. Jim Honeyford has proposed a plan to replace the Department of Ecology with a seven-member commission that would become Washington's water rights clearinghouse.

It's a long shot on several fronts -- Senate Bill 5087 would cost money to implement for one -- but Honeyford, R-Sunnyside, said it's at least worth talking about.

The primary objective is to allow the Department of Ecology to focus on water quality while placing the responsibility of water quantity into the hands of an elected commission. Those responsibilities would include things such as approving new water rights and changes to existing ones.

The current setup allows the agency to drag its feet on water rights because of its water quality concerns, Honeyford said.

"There is a conflict of interest," he said.

The bill is to get a hearing in the Senate's water subcommittee Wednesday. Under the plan, voters in Eastern and Western Washington would elect three commissioners each. A seventh would be appointed by the governor.

The Department of Ecology opposes the bill in concept, saying the Legislature needs to focus on changing the state's antiquated water laws.

"It's duplicative and doesn't solve the problem," said agency spokeswoman Sheryl Hutchison. "What we really need to be focusing on are those underlying laws and fixing them."

Columbia and Snake river irrigators, eager to loosen the state's hold on water resources, began mulling such legislation during a summit in July.

Honeyford believes it wouldn't cost much to implement the bill because the commission staff would be taken from the agency and housed in existing facilities.

Honeyford believes commissioners should be elected because it would make for a more responsive board. Other state commissions are filled by gubernatorial appointments.

It hasn't yet been determined how much the bill would cost to implement. But any bills requiring new spending are sure to be red-flagged when they get to budget writers' desks, given the state's sizable deficit.

That alone will make Honeyford's push difficult.

"Oh certainly," he agreed. "But it's time we get it out and discuss it."