

Black Geological Studies Article

January 25, 2003

Tri-City Herald

By Mike Lee

The proposed Black Rock reservoir will hold water, according to a first-level geology review discussed Friday at a meeting in Yakima. "We had no fatal flaws," Gary Ballew, reservoir project coordinator for Benton County, said after hearing the report by consultant Washington Group. "We are good to go on to the next steps." That doesn't mean the project will be as straightforward as hoped.

The dam site foundation will have to be excavated much deeper than initially thought in some places to get down to bedrock, Ballew said. Original cost estimates figured crews would have to dig down an average of 20 feet. Geological field work last fall, however, showed excavation will have to go down 100 feet in places, increasing the cost of a project already pegged at \$1.8 billion. "It's expensive," Ballew said of additional excavation. "But in the scope of the project, it doesn't appear that it would be that much more expensive that it would really throw the price of the project out of whack."

Also, project leaders are going to look at moving the dam 1,000 feet west in search of better footing at less cost. As for the reservoir end of the project, county consultants "are feeling pretty confident that the reservoir is going to hold water, except for maybe a couple spots that might be pathways for water to leave," Ballew said. Geologists will be investigating ways to make those spots less permeable. "You can't stop the water," Ballew said. "But you can reduce the permeability of the rocks so that not as much water flows through." The written geology report is going to be released to the public in a few weeks.

Meanwhile, Black Rock backers will continue to track the progress of congressional funding requests that would propel the next phase of the study. Up next are environmental reviews and a feasibility study, which will include a more detailed look at site geology. Black Rock was conceived as a way to more than double the existing water storage in the chronically water-short Yakima Valley. It would be in a nearly vacant Black Rock Valley west of Hanford in Yakima County. Water for the project would be pumped up from the Columbia River and then flow into the Yakima irrigation project, giving certainty to irrigators in water-short years and helping maintain water levels in the Yakima River for fish. *

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