

State House Gives Black Rock Study Cash

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The proposed Black Rock reservoir could receive a federal down payment on future studies that supporters said Thursday brings the water-dependent Yakima Valley closer to a brighter future.

Backers conducted a news conference — with a light rain falling — to hail the news and express concern that 2003 is shaping up to be another water-short year.

The Bureau of Reclamation, earlier in the afternoon, said total precipitation so far this winter remains below average. The agency won't issue its first forecast for the summer — which likely would trigger some water rationing — until March 6.

"We are in another drought," declared Charlie de La Chapelle, a Valley fruit grower and co-chairman of the Yakima Basin Storage Alliance, a citizens group pursuing the new reservoir.

The group also provided an update on geologic tests of the site for a proposed 600-foot-tall dam, near the intersection of State Route 24 and Highway 241. Those tests found the bedrock is adequate to support the dam.

Thursday's good news came from U.S. Rep. Doc Hastings, R-Pasco, who announced the House of Representatives approved \$1 million for a feasibility study of the huge reservoir, 40 miles east of Yakima on State Route 24. Other possible storage sites also will be looked at.

Backers will need another \$9 million to complete the feasibility study and an environmental impact statement.

Another \$4 million is being sought from the state Legislature.

Black Rock is projected to store 1.7 million acre-feet of water, and would nearly double existing storage in the Yakima River Basin.

Construction would take up to 10 years.

The federal funds are part of a huge package of spending bills that have been agreed on by House and Senate conferees. The Senate is expected to vote on the measures today.

While short of the \$2 million backers had hoped for this year, it represents a start, supporters said.

De La Chapelle told the news conference the Valley has suffered through a number of water shortages in recent years, with 2001 being the worst drought on record.

He said worries over water shortages add more urgency to the search for additional storage.

"This one is big enough to offer benefits for all segments of the economy," he said. "It is a first step in a long journey. Yakima has a bright future."

The Black Rock reservoir would store water pumped from the Columbia River. The water would be used to bolster water supplies for irrigators, allowing more water from current reservoirs to be used to increase river flows for fish. The lake also would offer recreation benefits.

Yakima County Commissioner Jesse Palacios called the reservoir an investment in the future.

"Black Rock is a very solid investment for our future, our children's future and our state's future," he said.

