

## **Yakima irrigation settlement reached**

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A 26-year-old court case over Yakima Basin water rights took a step forward Thursday as a large Yakima Basin irrigation provider announced a settlement with state, federal and tribal parties.

Since 1977, the Yakima County Superior Court case Department of Ecology v. Acquavella has embroiled water users, the state Department of Ecology, the federal Bureau of Reclamation and the Yakama Nation in a attempt to set and prioritize basin water rights.

But Thursday's announcement that the Sunnyside Division Board of Control will give up a contested water right and agree to conservation measures in exchange for a firm settlement of its water claims marks a key step in resolving the case, said Walter Stauffacher, presiding Yakima County Superior Court judge.

"It's really significant," Stauffacher said. The Sunnyside Division is one of the last major claimants in the case, he said, and if the proposed settlement passes his approval, "we could be looking at a finalization of this within the next year to 18 months."

About 40,000 water users are affected by the case, which was started by the state Ecology Department in 1977 as an attempt to set and prioritize Yakima Basin water rights.

The Sunnyside Division's settlement would provide it an annual confirmed water right of 435,400 acre-feet, in exchange for giving up its claim on about 23,000 acre-feet of irrigation water and agreeing to implement certain water conservation measures.

"We're happy to get to a place where we know what we've got," said Bob Golob, vice chairman of the Sunnyside Valley Irrigation District, which is the largest water user in the 100,000-acre Sunnyside Division Board of Control.

While the settlement could leave water users with a little less water than they had before, conservation and efficiency improvements to the system should balance out that loss, Golob said.

"Saving court costs and attorney fees is certainly going to help, too," he said. But most important is bringing a level of certainty to the region's farmers and other water users, he said.

"I think if you've been working for 25 years or more, you'd like to come to a completion," he said. State, federal and tribal representatives lauded the proposed settlement in prepared statements.

Tom Fitzsimmons, state Ecology Department director, called it a "major step forward," saying that "Money that would have been spent on arguing can be spent on making sure there's ample water for all our needs."

Ross Sockzehigh, chairman of the Yakama Nation Tribal Council, praised the decision, as it will provide more water in the lower Yakima River to help fish.

The Sunnyside Division includes the Benton, Grandview, Zillah and Sunnyside Valley irrigation districts, as well as the cities of Prosser, Grandview and Sunnyside.