

Water Plan Finds Reservoir of Support

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By DAVID LESTER

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PROSSER -- An arid and sagebrush-covered area east of Yakima is taking center stage as a possible answer to Yakima River Basin water shortages for farmers and fish.

Benton County commissioners' Monday, in a 2-1 vote, agreed to spend \$500,000 on a study of a potential water reservoir known as Black Rock, which would draw water from the Columbia River.

The reservoir would be just west of the junction of State routes 241 and 24, more than 40 miles east of Yakima.

The proposed reservoir would be larger than all five of the existing basin storage lakes combined, and the first developed since the last of the five reservoirs was completed in 1933. The new lake would provide a firmer water supply to the Roza Irrigation District and free up Yakima River water to improve flows for threatened fish.

The 72,000-acre Roza is limited to 35 percent of a full supply because of this year's drought. A group of Roza farmers and others urged county commissioners Monday during a workshop on the reservoir proposal at the Benton County Courthouse in Prosser to move forward with the study.

Charlie de la Chapelle, a Roza grower and Yakima resident, called it the best kind of investment of public funds.

"We are living off the investments of several previous generations," he said. "It's time we made an investment for the future."

De la Chapelle is a member of a newly formed basin group working for new storage.

Mike Hogue of Prosser, also a member of the group, known as the Yakima Basin Storage Alliance, told commissioners the 2001 drought is another nail in the coffin of Yakima Valley agriculture. Hogue, whose family also operates Hogue Cellars, one of the largest winemakers in the Yakima Valley, added tough times on the farm will affect the county and its citizens.

A portion of the Roza is in Benton County.

The relatively quick study, likely to take up to three months, would provide some answers on basic design and better define costs, likely to be well in excess of \$1 billion.

Benton County will hire a consulting firm to conduct the study.

A section of State Route 24 would have to be relocated if the reservoir is created. The current roadway, just west of the junction at The Silver Dollar Cafe, would be under water.

Study results would be ready in time for the 2002 legislative session. Gov. Gary Locke and the House and Senate leadership are working on legislative proposals on water resource issues, including storage, Benton County Commissioner Max Benitz said Monday.

Federal funding also will be sought, Benitz said.

State and federal fishery officials indicated a willingness Monday to take a further look at the reservoir proposal.

An exchange of water similar to the Black Rock plan has been done before, most recently in the Umatilla River in Oregon where Columbia River water is meeting irrigation needs, allowing Umatilla River water to remain in the stream for fish.

"This proposal might have some merit," said Dale Bambrick of Ellensburg, habitat team leader for the National Marine Fisheries Service. "We are having a hard time finding enough water in the Yakima basin to do right by fish and irrigation."

Bambrick added he had not been briefed on the specifics of the Black Rock plan, and his agency has not taken a position on the proposal.

Other sites are included in a resolution the three-member commission adopted, including expanding the Bumping and Cle Elum lakes, and creating an offstream reservoir in the Yakima River Canyon, north of Yakima.

But Black Rock, with the possibility to hold as much as 1.5 million acre-feet of water, is the key proposal. The five existing reservoirs have a capacity of slightly more than 1 million acre-feet of water.

Bandied about since the late 1970s, the site has attracted renewed interest this year in the midst of the worst drought in basin history.

Backers of the Black Rock plan have not been able previously to generate the kind of political support needed to make the reservoir a reality.

Benitz conceded the new reservoir faces some hurdles, including Columbia River water rights issues, environmental concerns and its high cost. But he said Monday's vote is an important decision for the future of the basin.

"This is a monumental step for providing leadership and direction from the board of county commissioners to address an adequate supply of water," Benitz said.

Benitz and Commissioner Leo Bowman voted for the resolution. Commissioner Claude Oliver voted against it, according to county officials. Oliver of Kennewick said later he is concerned the study is not part of a comprehensive look at all water needs in Benton County and does not include funding from cities in the county and other counties.

The money for the study comes from a \$4 million county public works fund that contains money paid the county in place of property taxes for federally owned land on the Hanford Nuclear Reservation.

As proposed, water would be pumped into the reservoir during periods of high flow in the Columbia River into the reservoir, created behind a 600-foot-tall dam.

Water would be released either through a canal or pipe to the Roza Canal, east of Terrace Heights.

Water from the lake also could be released back into the Columbia River through a second pipeline that would link the lake to the river, southeast of Priest Rapids. In both cases, the released water would be run through turbines to generate power.