

Proposed reservoir could cost \$1.6 billion

This story was published 11/20/2001

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Construction of a massive reservoir in eastern Yakima County would cost between \$1 billion and \$1.6 billion, according to a report released Monday.

If built, Black Rock Dam would be one of the largest dams of its kind in the world at about 600 feet high and a capacity of 1.7 million acre-feet of water. That's more than 10 times the storage capacity of Lake Keechelus, a major reservoir off Interstate 90 at Snoqualmie Pass.

"The costs are reasonable" for the amount of storage, said Gary Ballew, sustainable development manager for Benton County. "It was less than I was thinking."

But it's still an extraordinary amount of money to raise given a poor farm economy and the state's anti-tax environment. Most people close to the project say it will take a large infusion of federal money to build.

Nonetheless, Monday's report represents the first milestone in building a new reservoir in a river basin that hasn't added substantial storage in more than 60 years, even though it regularly suffers from drought.

"We still have some unanswered questions, but I am pleased at this time," said Max Benitz Jr., a Benton County commissioner and one of the forces behind the push for storage. So far, he added, "There are no fatal flaws."

Earlier this year, Benton commissioners took the lead on Yakima Basin water storage, approving \$500,000 for studies to help determine the best site for a reservoir and to move a project toward construction.

The Benton County Farm Bureau also pitched in \$10,000 and Gov. Locke pledged \$2 million to develop water storage projects statewide, including Black Rock.

The next steps for Benton County and its consultant are improving the accuracy of the cost figures, taking the project to the region for public comments, settling technical questions about water supply and making sure the Black Rock valley will hold water.

Top alternatives involve building a pump station on the Columbia River downstream of Priest Rapids Dam. Water would be pumped more than 1,000 vertical feet up and over Umtanum Ridge to the wide valley where the water would be stored.

The least costly dam structure studied is a concrete-faced dam filled with rock, according to Washington Infrastructure Services, which did the study. The company is part of Washington Group International, a high-powered construction team with experience in large-scale dams such as Black Rock.

Cost ranges, which include a 25 percent contingency fund, are based on variables such as the size of the water pipes needed to operate Black Rock. The optimum size is still unknown.

Also, it would initially cost more to tunnel through the ridge rather than going over it, but tunneling may be a better long-term option because it would better accommodate a hydropower plant that uses water released from Black Rock back to the Columbia River.

Despite the gaps in information, Monday's draft report keeps the county on pace to present the Legislature with a storage proposal this winter, something Benitz and other water leaders want to do before the devastating effects of the 2001 drought wear off.

"The time frame we are working in is very aggressive," Benitz said. But, "We are still on schedule."

Though Yakima Basin irrigators are investigating several potential storage sites, Black Rock is the one that captures most of the attention. Part of the reason is because the reservoir could hold enough water to exceed current storage in the Yakima Basin, where five main reservoirs on the east slopes of the Cascade Mountains now hold about 1 million acre-feet of water.

Another reason for Black Rock's appeal is it may involve the fewest environmental challenges of any site, an issue that will be a top priority for the county and its consultants in coming reports. Such large projects typically include costly mitigation measures for destroyed habitat, but Black Rock comes with built-in benefits such as the ability to provide water for struggling salmon runs in the Yakima River.

"We think that the environmental benefits are going to outweigh the environmental costs," Ballew said.

That's not to say environmental issues won't shape the future of the project. One of the critical aspects of planning and design is water supply, and the National Marine Fisheries Service currently has a stranglehold on water withdrawals from the Columbia River.

Black Rock, however, may present an exception to the federal no-net-loss policy because some of the project benefits would be for endangered fish and most water eventually would be returned to the Columbia River via the Yakima.

"What we are really doing is borrowing the water for 40 miles," Ballew said. But, he acknowledged, "There are some serious questions" about water supply.