

Black Rock Dam Could Be Cure for Water Ills

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Some might catch their breath after hearing that a preliminary report says a huge reservoir 40 miles east of Yakima could cost as much as \$1.6 billion.

It's a lot of money, but it would be for a long-overdue project that does a whole lot of good things for the long-range economic and recreational well-being of the entire Yakima River Basin.

To put things in some perspective, and all things being equal, \$1.6 billion would run state government for a little more than seven weeks. Closer to home, Congress has just approved \$1.8 billion for cleanup efforts at the Hanford nuclear reservation — just for the next fiscal year alone.

And state government, along with the feds, will have to play a significant role in the approval and funding of such a massive project.

The proposed Black Rock dam, designed to hold water pumped from the Columbia River, would be 600 feet high, with a capacity to store a maximum of 1.7 million acre-feet of water. Yakima basin irrigators are looking at several potential storage sites, but Black Rock is getting the most attention.

If built, the dam and lake would nearly triple the current water storage in the Yakima River Basin. The five current storage lakes have a combined capacity of slightly more than 1 million acre-feet of water. An acre-foot is the amount of water necessary to cover an acre of land to a depth of one foot.

Those five reservoirs have also been the sum and substance of basin storage since the last one — Lake Cle Elum — came on line in 1933. While conservation can do much to stretch those limited supplies, it stands to reason that more storage capacity is a vital necessity to meet the many new demands on surface water.

The problem in the past has always been that drought years are followed by wet winters, and as the reservoirs begin to refill the sense of urgency to expand water supplies diminishes in direct proportion. The problem down the line, though, is that if the basin is ever hit by several successive drought years, it's turn-out-the-lights time for the area's economy.

The Black Rock proposal is in the planning/feasibility stages, thanks in no small part to \$500,000 in seed money provided by Benton County. Gov. Gary Locke has pledged \$2 million in federal money to develop water storage projects statewide, including \$500,000 for Black Rock for a second, more technical phase of the study.

We eagerly await word later this week on preliminary findings about the recreational potential of the proposed new reservoir. Such potential has to be incredible and should have Yakima Valley boaters and people who like to fish salivating at the prospects.

The main element that makes the proposed reservoir attractive in today's scheme of things: The new lake at Black Rock would provide a firmer water supply to the Roza Irrigation District while freeing up Yakima River water to improve flows for threatened fish.

If we're going to try to be all things to all fish because of the Endangered Species Act, then we need to come up with more water to do so, not grab from supplies that are already inadequate to meet the basin's top priority irrigation needs.

The plan is to present the Legislature with a proposal in January's session while the memory of this year's drought is still fresh.

Such bold new initiatives are needed in a basin that has not addressed its storage capacity in almost 70 years.

Members of the Yakima Herald-Republic editorial board are Robert Bickler, Sarah Jenkins and Bill Lee.