

Water Conservation or New Storage? Study Says Both

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A proposed Yakima watershed plan poised for public review concludes that conserving water alone won't solve the periodic droughts that grip the region.

The answer, according to the four-year, \$1.9 million draft plan, is to link conserving water with new storage.

Current storage holds less than half of the total amount of water used in the three-county basin for irrigation and fish flows each year.

The plan also looks at improving habitat and water quality, and makes some recommendations for ground water.

What elements of the draft plan, authorized and funded by the state Legislature in 1998, become reality over the next several years will be expensive. Even then, there's the difficult task of finding the money for big-ticket items.

Modernizing irrigation deliveries to conserve water would top \$400 million. New storage, based on the sites that could be selected, exceeds \$2 billion.

Storage and Conservation

The draft plan, prepared by a citizen planning group, is likely to renew criticism that local solutions have too often focused on storage without first wringing the maximum out of conserving water.

Storage backers say a place must be provided to hold conserved water for it to have a benefit.

Jim Esget, who heads a federal program for the Bureau of Reclamation in Yakima that focuses on conserving water and bolstering fish habitat, said there are elements of truth in both arguments.

Esget, manager of the 8-year-old Yakima River Basin Water Enhancement Project, has not been involved in the watershed planning group.

He said conservation efforts have been slowed by legal issues that center on a concept called relinquishment. State law requires that any water not used for five consecutive years be considered given up.

Irrigators would like to have access to water they save when the next severe drought comes along.

"I wouldn't say that conservation is a panacea. It should be looked at in a balanced way," he said. "Both sides are right. We should try some projects and see what it gets."

Until the relinquishment issue is resolved, however, few large-scale projects are likely.

But the watershed plan, at least, provides a start to finding answers that have eluded the basin for years, despite a variety of studies, water conservation efforts, and improved water quality, said Jim Milton, executive director of the Tri-County Water Resource Agency, the body created to receive state planning money.

"We are trying to look to the future to provide flexibility for fishery resources and the economic stability of a viable water supply," Milton said. "We have seen the impact on the economy of droughts."

While not specifying where additional storage should occur, the plan mentions as possibilities some new — and some decidedly old — storage options.

Among them are the huge Black Rock reservoir, east of Yakima, being pushed by a coalition of agriculture, political and business interests.

The 1.8 million acre-foot reservoir, easily the most expensive proposal at \$1.7 billion, would meet the plan's minimum requirement of 70 percent of an annual supply of water for the junior water districts in the Yakima River Basin. Those districts have rights to more than half the water that is delivered annually.

By comparison, junior districts received just 37 percent of a full supply during the historic 2001 drought.

Other projects include expanding Bumping Lake, west of Yakima. Creating a new Bumping dam, resulting in a tenfold increase in its current capacity of 33,700 acre-feet of water, has been discussed since the 1950s. A new dam is estimated to cost \$242 million.

Also on the block are the proposed Wymer reservoir in the Yakima River Canyon on Lmuma Creek, north of Yakima. It would be stream-fed and store 142,000 acre-feet of water at a cost of \$467 million.

Another option is to slightly expand Lake Cle Elum, also a topic of review for a decade, at a cost of \$17 million.

One proposal not addressed in the plan is drawing water from the Columbia River to supply the needs of the Kennewick Irrigation District. The 19,000-acre district draws its water from near Prosser.

Switching the Kennewick's source of supply would dramatically improve Yakima River flow conditions below Prosser, where low flows damage fish because of high water temperatures. Federal funds are being sought to finance the so-called Kennewick pump exchange project.

Lawmakers Launched Watershed Planning

The draft plan is the local response to a 1998 state watershed planning law passed by the Legislature. The law placed the responsibility for charting the future in each watershed in the hands of local citizens.

The law established an umbrella group comprised of Kittitas, Yakima and Benton county governments, larger cities and irrigation districts.

The Yakama Nation dropped out of the Tri-County group three years ago.

Nation officials contended Tri-County's majority of irrigators and elected officials would override its interests. They also criticized the consultant selected to perform detailed studies for the planning group.

Tribal officials have suggested the watershed plan is inadequate and lacks widespread public comment. Members of the planning unit, however, point to the dozens of citizens and agency representatives who have worked on the plan elements since 1999.

The planning group will meet on Wednesday to finalize the plan and then hand it off to county commissioners in Kittitas, Yakima, and Benton counties.

The county commissioners will conduct hearings on the plan, likely during the first quarter of 2003, before they adopt it. Once that is done, the plan will be handed off to a number of local, state and federal agencies that will have to implement its features.

Organizers of the planning unit can take some pride in being the first of 33 such groups in the state to complete its plan. A predecessor group, the Yakima River Watershed Council, did some of the work on which the current plan is based.

Counties to Take Public Comment

The subject of increasing water supply is likely to get the most attention when county commissioners conduct their hearings.

Steve George of Yakima, who led the water supply and management committee, said the plan concluded the optimum conservation wouldn't even meet the identified needs for water flows to protect fish, let alone insulate irrigators from severe droughts.

Among the conservation measures are lining canals and laterals, or replacing them with pressurized pipes. Other features include capturing water that runs off the end of fields for re-use within a district, automating irrigation canals, and constructing small canal-side reservoirs to store water for later use.

George, who administers a basin coalition of farm commodity groups with interest in water issues, said maximum conservation could result in more problems. Currently, water used by individual districts is returned to the river and captured by downstream users.

Seepage from open canals helps recharge surface wetlands and ground-water aquifers.

Making irrigators more efficient means less water runs off fields into drains and the Yakima River, where it is picked up by downstream users. Those users rely on that water for crops and would have to make up for it by drawing more from basin reservoirs.

"If the priority is to make irrigators 99 percent efficient, we might be creating a problem that is more difficult to address," he said.

Officials of the state Department of Fish and Wildlife have been involved in the habitat review and participated in the water supply review.

Regional director Jeff Tayer said the proposals for meeting the needs of the basin have to contain a strong conservation component to succeed.

There are, he said, some proposals that could help meet the needs in small areas of the basin. The Kennewick pump storage proposal is a good example. Others include Pine Hollow, the small reservoir proposed on Ahtanum Creek, west of Yakima, and the Wymer site.

"We always look at storage in the context of an overall package that includes conservation. It doesn't make sense to deal with increasing the supply if you don't deal with the demand side," he said.