



Sierra Club-led outing to Hawk Creek and site of the OCR-BuRec-proposed dam and reservoir that would permanently flood the valley. Yvonne Geissler-Eyler stands in the center. Rachael Paschal Osborn, then-CELP director, uses agency maps to point out locations for dam and reservoir. Photo: John Osborn

Time to Sunset State Dam-Building Agency

\$200 million spent in 10 years, no accountability

By John Osborn MD, Columbia River Future Project and Upper Columbia River Group Executive Committee. The article was originally published in The Crest, Journal of the Washington State Chapter, Fall 2016.

The Alpine Lakes Wilderness is now threatened with proposals to dam and drain lakes, the latest in proposals from the state's dam-building agency, Office of Columbia River (OCR).

The Creation of OCR

Ten years ago, Gov. Gregoire signed a bill creating the OCR within the Washington State Department of Ecology (Ecology), funded with \$200 million. The objective? To "aggressively pursue the development of water supplies."

Conservationists, hunters and anglers in eastern Washington vigorously opposed the creation of OCR — as did the state's water watchdog, the Center for Environmental Law and Policy (CELP). Sierra Club's Cascade Chapter morphed into a statewide chapter

(i.e., Washington State Chapter) partly in response to OCR's creation.

Eastern Washington is the most heavily dammed landscape on earth. The Columbia River, once perhaps the richest salmon river on earth, is now an "organic machine" of stair-stepping reservoirs plugged into an electric grid. Dam construction has had wrenching impacts on rivers, salmon, and people.

OCR is to state government what the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (BuRec) is to the federal government. OCR and BuRec are tightly joined for most water projects, funneling state monies for a cash-strapped BuRec and coordinating state/federal political support and public relations campaigns to create new dams and water projects.

Billions in new dam proposals, growing conflicts

The Hawk Creek Dam, proposed in 2007, would have permanently flooded lovely Hawk Creek Falls and the river valley that supported important wildlife habitat and ranchers. A rancher's daughter, Yvonne Geissler-Eyler, emerged as a leader opposing the project, even travelling to Washington D.C. to meet with Sen. Cantwell and other Congressional leaders.

Next, OCR/BuRec proposed a dam at Lower Crab Creek. Also costing billions, this dam would flood federal and state wildlife refuge, habitat for tens of thousands of sandhill cranes and other migratory waterfowl. Conservationist Estella Leopold helped to halt the project.

On the Similkameen River, OCR funded plans for the Shankers Bend dam that would permanently flood Palmer Lake (a popular fishery), a federal Superfund Site, and lands of the Lower Similka-meen Band in B.C.. OCR is exploring a new dam on the Similka-meen River in Canada, prompting criticism in both nations.

In 2009, rising from the ashes of the failed \$6 billion Black Rock Dam proposal, OCR/BuRec created the Yakima River Basin Water Enhancement Project Workgroup, shutting-out most conservation voices. The resulting \$5 billion proposal, the Yakima Plan, contains laudable elements like fish passage. The Yakima Plan, however, would destroy Ancient Forests at Bumping Lake, sage grouse habitat at Lmuma Creek, while transforming a popular recreation Lake Kachess into a mud flat – all at taxpayer expense.

Dam-building trumps conservation and efficiency: who pays?

BuRec claimed salmon benefits (the "Trojan Fish") in justifying \$5 billion in new Yakima water projects. Responding to concern by independent economists, Rep. Hans Dunshee led efforts in the State Legislature to secure an independent review by

Washington State Water Research Center. The analysis debunked the plan's inflated benefits. The response? OCR/BuRec and other Yakima Plan proponents have attacked or ignored the Water Research Center's economic analysis.

The OCR position is that the only way to solve the water problems is through dams and other destructive water projects. In a 2014 report, OCR states: "It is now apparent that certain project types, such as water acquisition and storage/operation modifications, are preferable over others such as conservation and efficiency."

Taxpayers have gotten little in return for their \$200 million investment in OCR. As the Capital Press reported February 12, 2016, OCR has spent all but \$7 million of the original \$200 appropriation and "little water has actually reached farmers." Having consumed all of their funding, the OCR now seeks more.

We cannot dam our way out of climate change and water scarcity. The controversial proposal to dam and drain waters in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness is just the latest proposal in a larger story. Rather than bringing people together through transparent public process and respectful dialogue, the OCR/BuRec path of pushing for new dams and water projects is unproductive, perpetuating a history of dam-building bitterness and litigation.

Our next Legislature should insist on a performance audit of OCR to account for \$200 million and adopt stringent economic tests for future water projects. Washington State needs smart, sustainable water management based on water efficiencies and conservation.