

News Release / Backgrounder

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Controversy continues over Yakima Water Plan as bill moves through Senate committee

Conservationists and Yakima Basin homeowners expressed dismay and alarm as the U.S. Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee today gave its approval to S. 1694, a bill by Washington Senator Maria Cantwell to authorize the Yakima River Basin Integrated Water Resource Plan (Yakima Plan), despite opposition and input from over 25 environmental, social and community organizations representing thousands of members.

"The bill reported would allow massive drawdowns of Lake Kachess, a beautiful Cascades alpine lake, rendering it unusable for years running, solely to provide inexpensive water to agricultural interests with junior water rights" said Robert Angrisano, President of the Kachess Community Association. "The bill authorizes large scale water pumping that will cause massive environmental damage. The proposal would decimate the shoreline resulting in miles of mudflat areas at recreation locations and 80' cliff impediments to endangered bull trout spawning habitat. This will effectively eliminate the use of the Lake [Kachess Campground](#), one of the State's busiest campgrounds. Yet there has been no research done as to how severe those impacts will be or if they can be avoided. Congress should not authorize construction of such controversial projects before they have been fully planned and the impacts known., Furthermore, the public should know in advance what is being proposed and the impacts of the proposal and at least have an opportunity to comment and provide input. These are public resources and they are being sacrificed for purely private gain."

Since the 1970s, controversy has swirled around building new federal irrigation dams and water projects in the Yakima Basin. Leading up to the November 19th Senate bill mark-up was a process begun in 2009 by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the Washington Department of Ecology. The two agencies selectively chose special interest representatives to for a group called the "Yakima River Basin Water Enhancement Project Work Group" which created the Yakima Plan. Plan proponents tout the Yakima Work Group as a "national model." The two government agencies, however, have excluded most conservation groups and all homeowner groups, private citizens, and fire departments in the impacted areas. Not surprisingly, the work product from the self interested Workgroup is one-sided and not compliant with federal advisory committee statutes.

The Yakima Work Group produced a single alternative: a collection of projects selected by group members with an estimated **\$5 billion price tag**. Since then, the 'Phase I'

project costs have skyrocketed by more than 300%. The total plan is likened to a "bundle of sticks," some of the "sticks" such as fish passage have public interest merit while others are costly, controversial, and environmentally destructive dam and irrigation water supply projects.

Cost to taxpayers ultimately will be a central issue for Congress in the Yakima Basin and throughout the West. The existing federal Yakima Project managed by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation was constructed to store and divert 1.2 million acre-feet of water from five reservoirs in the Cascade Mountains, serving irrigation districts in Kittitas, Yakima and Benton counties. Here, construction costs totaled \$286 million, with \$149 million allocated to be paid by irrigators. In 2014 the [GAO reported Yakima Valley irrigators](#) have yet to repay those costs. Enacting the Yakima Plan through S. 1694 would substantially increase the taxpayer burdens and costs with no assurance the irrigators would ever pay their allocated share.

In 2013, the cash-strapped Washington Legislature tasked independent economists to study the latest Yakima Basin proposal. In December 2014, a team of [Washington State Water Research Center economists](#) concluded that costs of water supply projects in the Yakima Basin – including new dams – outweigh benefits by 90 percent or more. In contrast, proposed fisheries enhancement projects of importance to tribes and the general public are cost effective.

"While it is encouraging that attention is being given to water issues within the Yakima Valley, this latest version of S. 1694 continues to support what could continue to be the full gamut of elements of the highly controversial and deeply flawed plan," said Chris Maykut, Friends of Bumping Lake. "Proposed surface water storage projects have been shown in non-biased studies to be major money losers for Washington taxpayers, and there are numerous other forward-thinking solutions that don't involve destruction of ecosystems or private property."

"Nearly 40 percent of irrigation water in the Yakima Basin goes to high water using, low economic-value crops such as hay and wheat," said Jay Schwarz of Friends of Lake Kachess. "In fact, they use nearly four times the water to produce the same economic value as more water efficient high economic value crops like fruit, hops, wine grapes and vegetables. Addressing this water usage issue is the key for the Basin solving its own water scarcity issues without massive taxpayer subsidies."

"In a time of climate change and water scarcity, our shared water future rests with sensible, affordable solutions," said Grant Learned Jr of the Friends of Lake Kachess. "Sharing water between senior and junior water-right holders through water markets and water banks, metering water use just like city folks do, water conservation, planting appropriate crops and crop insurance are all tools in the toolbox to address water scarcity. While the reported Committee bill makes some gestures toward these areas, when in fact it is undermining the incentives to irrigators to conserve. The bill removes the conservation targets set in 1994 that the irrigators have not yet achieved and instead sets a minimal conservation target with no timeline for achievement. Authorizations for water storage projects for which detailed plans are non-existent today will provide no guarantees that water irrigators will not just ignore conservation and efficiency (as they have since 1994), and pursue dangerous, destructive, and costly water projects instead."

Water is a scarce- not unlimited- resource. We are following California's lead and we will soon be faced with the same outcomes: dry lakes, depleted aquifers, environmental and social damage, useless and expensive dams and still not sufficient water to meet the insatiable demands of irrigators who simply demand more subsidies rather than managing their crops with the prudence of any entity faced with management of a precious commodity. To irrigators, water should always be available in the amount they want and when they want it regardless of the cost or impacts to the environment and society."

While the conservation organizations and Basin homeowner Groups are shocked that Senator Cantwell and the committee are moving forward with this legislation in the face of clearly controversial and unresolved issues, they remain committed to opposing the legislation to Senators Cantwell and Murray and the full Senate in the coming weeks.