

FLOODING THREATENS ANCIENT FOREST AT BUMPING LAKE

(A version of this article by Marc Bardsley appeared in the Winter 2011 edition of The Wild Cascades, journal of the North Cascades Conservation Council.)

The splendid old forests surrounding Bumping Lake, east of Mt. Rainier, somehow escaped the onslaught of logging that wiped out so much ancient forest during the twentieth century. Here one can see wonderful old Douglas fir, ponderosa pine and other kinds of trees. Most of what little ancient forest remains has done so because it is on steep ground, but not at Bumping. The impressive forests there are all the more remarkable, rare and irreplaceable because they grow on nearly flat ground. After a century of threats to raise the dam and flood these lovely forests, why has the situation become so dire now?

Supposedly Samuel Clemens once said that "whisky's for drinking, water's for fighting over." The politics of water in the Yakima basin could fill a book, one that most people would prefer to steer well clear of. But someone else also said "you may not be interested in politics, but politics is interested in you..." Yakima water politics has taken a strong interest in the forests of the Cascades at Bumping Lake. With five large reservoirs already storing massive quantities of water in the basin, why is there now such a pressing need for yet more? The short answer seems to be that no amount of water is ever enough to satisfy irrigated agribusiness interests, and that the added pressure of sprawl development in Kittitas County is now sticking another straw into the glass that is the Yakima water supply and sucking up water via uncontrolled well drilling. Every gallon of water going on to the lawns and golf courses of Kittitas County is a gallon that doesn't flow downstream, or nearly so. If raising the dam at Bumping Lake is seen as easier than facing the problems of irrigation waste and uncontrolled well drilling, that's what will happen.

Huge amounts of water are wasted by Yakima agribusiness interests, through unlined canals, wasteful flood irrigation, aerial spraying and many other ways. It would be interesting to compare how much water it takes to grow a unit of food in the Yakima valley versus, say, Israel. But we are unlikely to ever get that number. Likewise, there are few

or no limits on well drilling in Kittitas County, and once a well is in, the only limit on pumping is the cost of electricity, which is cheap. Agribusiness likes things the way they are and much prefers getting more water to making what they already have go farther. And the ever multiplying residents of Kittitas County, many of them at least, seem to view unlimited groundwater pumping as their inalienable right. Ergo, the forests around Bumping Lake must go.

Other means of addressing the "problem" of not enough water for Yakima valley agribusiness have been mooted. Several sites have been considered for pumped storage projects, where a canyon would be dammed, flooding shrub-steppe grasslands, and water from the Columbia pumped uphill for storage. The laws of physics and common sense make these options unattractive to say the least. Yet another someone once said "water runs uphill toward money," but not even Yakima valley agribusiness seems capable of mustering the titanic public subsidies that would be needed to build and especially to power these gravity defying monsters. They seem less and less likely.

Thus back to Bumping Lake. From a purely engineering standpoint, it's much cheaper and easier to dam up water where it is already uphill rather than moving it there. Raising the dam at Bumping Lake to add storage there would cost orders of magnitude less than pumped storage. Only the old growth forests around the present reservoir stand inconveniently in the way.

So it appears that the state and Federal governments are moving inexorably toward a decision to raise the dam at Bumping, as the path of least cost and least resistance. It will, of course, be presented as part of a package that will supposedly include fish passage improvements at various places in the Yakima basin. But as with all such plans, who knows what devils will lurk in the details, and there are no end of details here. In particular, if the money to raise the dam at Bumping is appropriated, will the money for the other "good things" also be appropriated in a tangible, real-world, cash-in-hand kind of way? Past experience with such packages is not encouraging. The dam at Bumping will most certainly get dollars appropriated to raise it, but the other parts of the plan could well be "authorized," but without hard cash, as has happened in many other places. Perhaps

we would someday hear, and not for the first time, how these other noble goals, restored fish passage in this case, are "aspirational..."

It's also worth remembering that even in the unlikely event that all these new fish ladders get built, there are no guarantees that fish will again become abundant. Sometimes fish ladders work well, sometimes they don't. They are better than nothing but their record is mixed at best. They may or may not accomplish much in the Yakima basin.

There also seems to be talk about "mitigating" the loss of the Bumping Lake old growth by some sort of protection for forests elsewhere. One candidate is apparently the old Boise Cascade timberlands in the lower Teanaway basin in Kittitas county. While the acreage in the Teanaway may exceed that of the area to be flooded around Bumping Lake, the two areas are worlds apart qualitatively. The forest around Bumping, as Brock Evans has explained, is an outstanding example of east side old growth, most of it with the added rarity of being on nearly flat land. The Teanaway "forest" is one of the most heavily cut over pieces of ground in eastern Washington, where a forty year old tree qualifies as ancient.. The two are not comparable. It's also worth noting that any "protection" for the Teanaway would almost certainly be limited to conservation easements to keep houses from being built. Logging would continue there as usual.

It's no exaggeration to say that old growth forests like those around Bumping Lake are irreplaceable. Even in the unlikely event that every aspect of a Yakima basin package was fully and immediately funded, could it really be a good deal to trade them away for keeping houses (which may or may not ever actually be built) off of some rather unremarkable cutover land elsewhere? Would it be worth trading them for the promised installation of some fish passage facilities of highly uncertain effectiveness? Could it really be a good deal to sacrifice these forests while ignoring the unrestricted well drilling and wasteful use of water that are the real problems here?

It's easy to get lost in the dreadful details of Yakima water politics, and in so doing to lose sight of the bigger picture of what it all means.

Everyone eats, and in the larger scheme of things it makes sense to irrigate lands in a warm fertile valley like that of the Yakima. But no one is starving, there is plenty of water already available to supply these farming operations, and they could make the water they already have go much farther. Raising the dam and flooding the forests of Bumping Lake is a grab for more by people who already have plenty. Not just a grab, but a demand that everyone else pay for it. Yakima agribusiness won't be paying for the damming of Bumping, the taxpayers will. As such it is yet another example of corporate welfare, where a lucky few benefit while the rest pay the costs, not merely the usual billions of dollars in this case but also including forests at Bumping, the likes of which we'll never see again if they get their way.

In our next issue, The Wild Cascades hopes to delve deeper into the Bumping Lake threat, looking in more depth at the remarkable forests at stake, and the historic decades-long opposition to flooding of them by Yakima-born Supreme Court Justice and Goose Prairie resident William O. Douglas.