



Opening Statement
Senator Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.)
Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Hearing on S. 1694 Yakima River Basin Water Enhancement Project
Phase III Act of 2015
July 7, 2015

“Thank you, Madam Chairman, for scheduling this important hearing. And, thank you all for being here this morning.

“As you mentioned, both of our states are feeling the impacts of drought and climate impacts. And I know that this legislation is an example of how the best and brightest are working hard at solutions on the local level. So thank you for having a hearing on S. 1694.

“Before I start, besides thanking the witnesses that are here from Washington—representatives from the states, the tribes, the agricultural community—we are also joined by Yakima County Commissioner Michael Leita and Yakama Nation Councilmember Gerald Lewis, so thank you both for being here, as well.

“S. 1694—the Yakima River Basin Water Enhancement Project Phase III Act of 2015—is critical legislation for the state of Washington, for new water management for the state, and I believe it is a model for water management across the West.

“This bill is a major accomplishment for people who have been working on this issue for decades.

“Drought in Washington state and across the West has caused billions of dollars in impacts this year alone and is predicted to cost billions more in the coming years. In a report released last July, the White House concluded that confronting climate catastrophes requires taking prudent steps now to prevent more severe consequences and costs later. I couldn't agree more.

“As the Yakima Basin faces continued drought and climate impacts, the federal government has a responsibility to act now to prevent future impacts and costs in meeting its legal responsibilities in the basin—which include managing extensive Bureau of Reclamation projects; treaty and trust responsibilities with the Yakama Nation; and federal responsibilities in managing lands.

“Failure to act, as mentioned, could have catastrophic economic and environmental impacts. And moving forward with an ounce of prevention could go a long way. Some of the issues here affect some of the most productive agricultural lands in our country, as well as some of the most important sockeye salmon runs in the United States.

“S. 1694 authorizes the initial phase of a long-term water resources plan for the basin and recognizes the responsibility and the imperative to act now.

“This bill will dramatically enhance the sustainability and resilience of the basin—from snowfed streams in the Cascade Mountains to the farms of the Yakima valley, which are famous for their apples, cherries, hops and wine.

“The Yakima Integrated Plan is designed to provide a balanced approach to long-term water supply and environmental issues in the basin. It will provide more dependable water supplies to meet agricultural and municipal needs and it will significantly restore the fisheries and ecosystems of the Yakima River and its tributaries.

“The plan was developed through extraordinary collaboration between local stakeholders—represented by the witnesses here today. This work group includes state, local and tribal officials, agricultural interests and environmental groups. And I have to say—it's amazing to see how much progress they have made working together. They have really created a bond, which has been exemplary in keeping to the task at hand. Working together, they have developed an integrated approach to managing water that could not be accomplished without cooperation. And the result is what is before us today—a holistic approach.

“Without this plan, the Yakima Basin will likely face continued water shortages and economic impacts, estimated by the state this year to reach \$1.2 billion in crop loss.

“This summer, the basin is facing an unprecedented drought. In some cases, irrigation districts are delivering only 25 percent of normal water supplies.

“Low streamflows and warm water throughout the basin are also threatening fish such as steelhead and sockeye salmon. Protection of these species is critical to our communities—and particularly important to the Yakama Nation.

“Science tells us that drought conditions are likely to persist in the basin in the coming years. Low snowpacks and heat are predicted to intensify with climate change and are likely to become the new normal.

“So the Yakima Integrated Plan puts into place the necessary steps for the future of the Yakima Basin.

“The state of Washington is already investing in the Yakima Integrated Plan. Just last week the state appropriated \$30 million for the plan, after providing \$137 million in its last budget. In spite of severe budget constraints, the state recognizes that investing now to avoid more economic loss in the future or environmental impacts is critical.

“The Bureau of Reclamation’s statutory mandate to manage the basin’s dams, hydropower facilities and irrigation infrastructure, and legal requirements to manage streamflows for tribal, fisheries and other needs means that the federal role is part of the solution.

“Without an integrated approach in the basin, the federal government will face significant challenges, litigation and costs in meeting these responsibilities. It's good to see Mr. Iseman here today and that in his testimony, he says he supports an integrated approach, which includes water storage, water conservation, streamflow management, fish passage, habitat improvement and providing for the best opportunities moving forward.

“S. 1694 does just that. It includes provisions for:

- Improved water infrastructure, storage and conservation,
- Ecosystem restoration and
- Construction of permanent fish passage at two dams.

“Nearly every component of this plan will help both farmers and fish in the Yakima Basin. Projects will provide water to support the region's \$3.2 billion agricultural economy, while also restoring salmon runs that have been blocked for more than 100 years. This includes helping to restore one of the largest sockeye salmon runs in the lower 48.

“Because of local interest and their willingness to sit down and make a plan, I hope this does become a model for integrated storage plans and holistic approaches. I do think it's a new paradigm in water management that could be replicated in other parts of the country.

“Here in the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, we hear of divisive water conflicts in other parts of the West that are leading to gridlock, which is ultimately destructive to both the economy and the environment. I think this approach taken in Yakima Basin points us down a different path.

“I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today and again thank all of the local individuals who have worked so hard on this project and moving it forward to where we are today in this legislation of S. 1694. I want to thank Sen. Murray for being an original co-sponsor of this legislation.”

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