

**Testimony of Urban Eberhart
General Manager – Kittitas Reclamation District
Farmer in the Yakima River Basin**

**Before the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
United States Senate**

**Legislative Hearing
On S. 1694**

**“A bill to amend Public Law 103-434 to authorize Phase III of the Yakima River Basin
Water Enhancement Project for the purposes of improving water management in the
Yakima River basin, and for other purposes.”**

**Washington, D.C.
July 7, 2015**

Chairwoman Murkowski, Senator Cantwell, and Members of the Committee, my name is Urban Eberhart and I am the General Manager of the Kittitas Reclamation District (KRD), an irrigation district serving 60,000 acres of prime farmland in the Yakima River Basin in the vicinity of Ellensburg, Washington. I am also a farmer in the Yakima River Basin. I was raised on our family farm near Ellensburg and am still growing apples, pears and hay in the Badger Pocket area of the Kittitas Valley.

I have been following and working on the Yakima River Basin Water Enhancement Project (YRBWEP) ever since I went to my first Yakima water enhancement meeting with my father back in 1979, the year Congress authorized a feasibility study to address the water resource needs of the Yakima River basin; the Act of December 12, 1979 (93 Stat. 1241, Public Law 96-162). An outgrowth of this study was the implementation of Phase I (fish ladders and fish screens) and Phase II (water conservation and other measures) of the YRBWEP.

I was an active participant in the development of the 1994 YRBWEP Phase II legislation. I have also been intimately involved in the development of the Yakima River Basin Integrated Plan, a forward looking holistic approach to dealing with the expected problems in the Basin to help meet all water demands over the next several decades. I support the enactment of S. 1694 authorizing Phase III of the YRBWEP and beginning the first ten years implementation of the Integrated Plan.

The Yakima Irrigation Project in the Yakima River Basin includes seven divisions: Storage, Kittitas, Tieton, Sunnyside, Roza, Kennewick, and Wapato serving irrigable lands totaling approximately 464,000 acres. The Wapato Division is operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, but receives most of its water supply from the Yakima Project for irrigation of 136,000 acres of land. Over 45,000 acres not included in the seven divisions are irrigated by private interests

under water supply contracts with the Bureau of Reclamation. The six water storage dams and reservoirs on the Project are Bumping Lake, Clear Creek, Tieton, Cle Elum, Kachess, and Keechelus. Other Project features include five diversion dams, canals, laterals, pumping plants, drains, three hydropower plants, and transmission lines.¹

The Yakima River Basin is one of the most productive agricultural areas in the Nation. Yakima County ranks first among all counties of the United States in the production of apples, mint, and hops.² Principal crops grown in the Basin include fruit, vegetables, forage, hops, and mint, with many highly productive dairies, fruit packaging plants, and other related businesses and industries tied to our Basin's bountiful harvests. These industries in the basin alone produce more than \$1.8 billion in crops and \$1.4 billion in food processing sales while supporting more than 5,700 jobs. And, a reliable supply of water for irrigation is a critical requirement for these industries.³

The Yakima River Basin is also home to significant fish and wildlife resources, including an anadromous fish population of steelhead, currently protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and salmon runs. These fish runs are part of the important recreational and tribal resources in our basin. The Yakama Nation is also located in the basin, and has historically relied on these fish and wildlife resources for generations. These ancient fish runs declined precipitously during the mid-Twentieth Century, and were a source of contention over water supplies and water management in the basin for many years. Recent efforts to improve these fish runs through increased water conservation and improved water management have seen some marked success. But additional investments in improved water management and conservation in the basin are still needed, which S. 1694 supports.

The KRD is a fully proratable irrigation district – in other words, our district is one of several (Roza, Wapato and Kennewick Districts round out the group) in the Basin that is the first to be cut in a water short year. This year (2015) we are experiencing a significant water supply shortage in the Basin, and the proratable irrigation districts like ours are currently receiving only 44 percent of our normal supply. The term “proratable” is unique to the Yakima River Basin and, in our Basin, the proratable water users are much like junior water rights, in that we will not receive any water until the non-proratable (or senior) users are expected to receive one hundred percent of their supply for the water year. This year, the farmers in KRD will be out of water the first week of August, which means water will be cut off two and a half months earlier than normal. And, the Roza Irrigation District (another proratable district) was forced to shut down its entire water delivery system for three weeks during the prime growing season this spring/summer to ensure their farmers had water into September this year. In fact, the Washington State Department of Agriculture on May 11 came up with a forecast for a \$1.2

¹ Source: Bureau of Reclamation.

² Ibid.

³ Source: State of Washington

billion statewide crop loss due to the drought, mostly due to expected losses in the Yakima River Basin.

We have seen several of these water short years during the past two decades, and many of us are fearful this may become our new “normal” – low snowpacks during the winter, with average rainfall. We do not have enough water storage to capture all the rainfall events – snowpack has been our other reservoir to store our water and slowly release it during snow melt in the spring and early summer. Without the snowpack, our total reservoir storage capacity is diminished considerably. The Yakima Basin does not have enough water storage and is trying to meet over 2.4 million acre-feet of water needs annually with only about 1 million acre-feet of active storage capacity. The Yakima Basin is experiencing increased pressures and demands on our 1 million acre-feet of reservoir storage capacity which cannot make up for shortages like we are experiencing this year – we need more available water storage carrying capacity to meet our dry-year demands.

The frequency of drought in the Basin is expected to increase in the future, but estimating future drought conditions at the current frequency we have been experiencing, this equates to at least 20 droughts during the next 100-year time span.

To help plan for expanding our access to more irrigation and M&I water storage capacity and to help relieve tensions in the basin over water supply management, irrigation interests have worked with other water stakeholder interests and the Yakama Nation in developing the Yakima Basin Integrated Plan, a well thought out, long-term comprehensive set of solutions to restore ecosystem functions and fish habitat and improve long-term reliability of water supplies for stream flows, agricultural irrigation and municipal supply. The Integrated Plan was developed in a public, collaborative process involving local, state, federal and tribal governments plus stakeholders representing environmental, irrigation and business interests.

The consensus achieved by this diverse group represents a major and unprecedented accomplishment for the Yakima Basin and for water management in the western United States. The Integrated Plan offers a means to avoid a tangle of litigation and hardship for water interests in future years. The Yakima Basin Integrated Plan is believed to be the first basin-wide integrated plan in the United States to reach the level of success that it has achieved.

Prior efforts to increase water storage in the Yakima Basin have failed, in part due to a lack of consensus among the key stakeholders. The Integrated Plan offers the best opportunity in decades to resolve long-standing problems afflicting the Basin’s ecosystem and economy. In addition, making available increased water storage for farms, fish and our communities is a key component of the Plan. When implemented, the Plan will greatly improve operational flexibility to support stream flows while meeting the basin’s basic water supply needs under a wide range of seasonal and yearly snowpack and runoff conditions, both now and under possible future hydrologic conditions.

Overall, S. 1694 would provide the Secretary of the Interior with the authorities necessary to carry out first ten years of the Integrated Plan. But a critically important and creative component of the bill includes providing innovative authorities for our non-federal proratable districts to be able to design, construct and maintain the much needed water storage access facilities contemplated by this phase of the Integrated Plan. The bill would authorize the Secretary of the Interior to enter into long-term agreements with the proratable irrigation entities in the Yakima Basin, including KRD, to plan, design, construct and maintain the Kachess drought emergency pumping plant and the Keechelus-to-Kachess pipeline on Federally-owned lands to allow these districts to access the inactive surface water storage during drought years. Our view is for the Secretary to operate the facilities in order to fully integrate their benefits into the Project operations, while protecting the resources of the Basin. I believe this effort could be the first of its kind, and is innovative enough that other areas of the West could benefit from similar arrangements. Under S. 1694, Section 1214, the proratable districts in the Basin would enter into long-term agreements with the Secretary and Reclamation to provide non-federal ownership, management and financing in the construction of these two facilities, bringing emergency drought relief water supplies to the Basin quicker and with no burden on the federal budget. While we have some additional suggested improvements to the language of S. 1694, as introduced, to further clarify the provisions in Section 1214, we understand that we will have an opportunity to provide such language and look forward to working with the Committee in improving this section of the bill.

Another important provision in S. 1694 deals with restoring water flows in the tributaries in the Basin. These tributaries offer some of the best cold water habitats to native anadromous fisheries in the watershed, but access to these upper watersheds have been degraded over the years by water withdrawals and lack of streambed management. S. 1694 would authorize the Secretary to work in partnership with local irrigation districts, the State of Washington, the Yakama Nation and other stakeholders in providing the additional technical and other resources necessary in restoring these tributaries and enhancing fish habitat for the benefit of the Basin.

The pilot concept implemented on Manastash Creek in the upper watershed is a great example of success that the legislation would emulate in other creeks and streams in the Yakima Basin. Manastash Creek, a tributary of the Yakima River, provides irrigation water to approximately 4,500 acres of farmland through diversions from the creek. The creek also once served as important habitat for steelhead and coho salmon. Before the completion of this pilot project, a 3.25-mile reach of lower Manastash Creek was seasonally dewatered by irrigation water withdrawals. The Manastash Creek Project converted 3.2 miles of a KRD canal to a pressured pipeline, conserving over 1,200 acre-feet of water annually that is used to keep water flows in the creek during critical fish migration periods.

The Manastash project resulted in multiple instream and out-of-stream benefits. The conserved water increased instream flow in the lower Manastash Creek by around 3.5 cubic feet per second and significantly improved access to approximately 25 miles of important habitat for steelhead,

coho, bull trout, and spring Chinook. Other benefits include reduced seepage, improved local irrigation system reliability, and increased on-farm efficiencies and water conservation through the use of pressurized sprinkler systems. In other words, farmers are still farming, and the creek is now flowing opening up miles of habitat for salmon and steelhead species in the process.

In closing, we are currently benefiting from our forefathers' vision and accomplishments in building our highly productive and valuable agricultural economy through the federally developed water storage and delivery projects in the Yakima River Basin. Our communities, schools, and businesses have all been built around these investments and depend on our water supplies more today than ever before. Now we must find ways to continue to improve this infrastructure to meet the problems of tomorrow, including the impacts of severe drought years on our communities, our river, and our economy. I believe we have a good start with S. 1694 and, as irrigation districts in need of additional dry-year water supplies, we are stepping up to the plate in financing and constructing new water supply infrastructure in innovative ways.

Also, as an irrigation community, we have come to recognize that, in order to protect and enhance our ability to farm and to raise families in our communities, we must work with our neighbors, the Yakama Nation, as well as the other important stakeholders in the basin, to successfully plan for our collective future. That is what we have accomplished in creating, and now implementing, the Yakima Basin Integrated Plan.

The State of Washington has provided over \$130 million over the past two years to assist in implementing the Integrated Plan, our proratable irrigation districts are contemplating a non-federal investment in the hundreds of millions to build new water supply infrastructure and water conservation improvements under the Plan, and we look forward to the enactment of S. 1694 to assist in implementing the Plan, improving habitat for fish and wildlife, and creating new emergency storage water supplies for the future of the Yakima River Basin, the State of Washington, and the arid West. Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony and I would be happy to answer any questions.