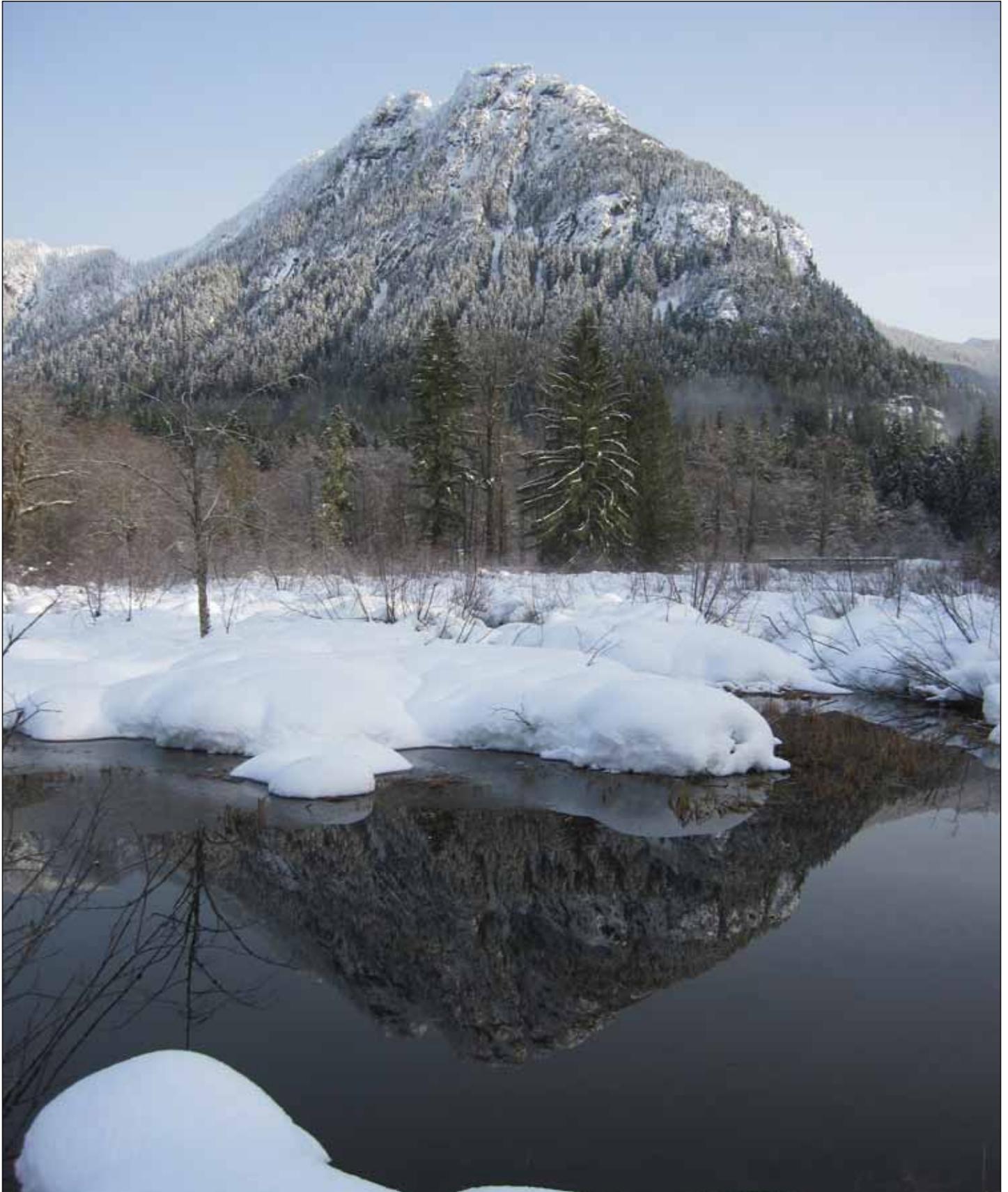


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Yakima Plan blunders on

By Karl Forsgaard

In January 2013, significant events transpired in the campaign of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and State Department of Ecology to construct two new dams in the Yakima Basin, including a dam that would drown and destroy more than 1,000 acres of ancient forest at Bumping Lake, and establish two new National Recreation Areas for off-road vehicles (ORVs). Events included conclusion of meetings on the lands component of the Yakima Plan, and introduction of State legislation to fund early implementation items.

Attempts to fix flawed Yakima Plan lands elements

The dam proponents wrapped up their so-called “Ross process” of conservation organization meetings conducted by a professional facilitator (Ross Strategic) funded by BuRec and Ecology.

The “Ross process” gathered input (including considerable constructive criticism) on the dam proponents’ proposal for motorized National Recreation Areas (NRAs) in the Upper Yakima, Teanaway, Manastash and Taneum basins of Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest (OWNF), north and south of I-90 in Kittitas County. As previously reported in the Spring 2012 and Summer/Fall 2012 issues of *TWC*, the NRA proposal would legislatively dedicate 41,000 acres to “backcountry motorized” use, i.e., off-road motorcycles, ATVs and 4x4s on trails, and snowmobiles traveling cross-country.

Yakima irrigation districts and groups seeking a Federal/State acquisition of 46,000 acres of privately owned forest land in the Teanaway basin continue to support the Yakima Plan. But within the conservation community it remains highly controversial. Of the 29 organizations who signed letters in March 2012 about the NRAs, none has become a supporter of the Yakima Plan.¹

Four of the dam proponents were so-called “sponsors” of the Ross process (American Rivers, National Wildlife Federation, Trout Unlimited and TWS). In response to the controversy they created, and based on the input received in the Ross process, these dam proponents say they will propose “changes and refinements” to the NRA Proposal in the Yakima



Motorcycle ruts in mud on South Fork Taneum Trail. —KARL FORSGAARD PHOTO

Workgroup’s Lands Subcommittee, as well as a recommendation to add seats on the Subcommittee for motorized and non-motorized recreation, grazing, and hunting/fishing. The proposed “changes and refinements” include some improvements that NCCC recommended, but overall the Ross process did not “fix” the defects, and the NRA Proposal is still a bad idea and a bad precedent. NCCC’s input was constructively trying to help make it less bad.

The sponsors’ proposed “changes and refinements” to the public lands designations include:

- The name of the two areas would be changed from NRAs to NCRAs (National Conservation and Recreation Areas).
- Boundary changes would delete the northwestern portion of each NCRAs, and shift the boundaries south and east (which reduces the amount of Snoqualmie Pass Adaptive Management Area lands included in the proposed NCRAs).
- The authorizing legislation would set up “a multi-stakeholder process to develop the management plan” for each NCRAs “that lays out the recreational zoning,” i.e., which sites would have motorized recreation, and which would not, would be determined after Congress creates the NCRAs.
- The proponents added an express acknowledgement that the land managers have authority to close routes and areas to motorized use where it is causing adverse ecological impacts and/or use conflicts (per the Nixon-Carter Executive Orders on ORV use of federal lands, codified as the Travel Management rule).
- Express acknowledgement of the need to fund monitoring and enforcement every year after the NCRAs are created.
- The dam proponents “realize that there will be those groups who remain fundamentally opposed” to what they are doing (which is better than being in denial about the existence of that opposition). We encouraged the dam proponents to continue constructive engagement with those who oppose the Yakima Plan.

In the Ross meetings, NCCC also advocated that the proposed NCRAs should be consistent with the Sierra Club/NCCC/ALPS map of recommended Wilderness and other land designations submitted to the OWNF Forest Plan Revision process in September 2011. The areas proposed as Wilderness on this map would be open to the many types of recreation allowed in Wilderness, including hiking, horseback riding, fishing, hunting, camping, backpacking, climbing, bird-watching (or observing any plants, animals, minerals), snowshoeing and skiing. The areas proposed as “Roadless, Non-motorized” on this map would be open to all of those uses, and could also be open to mountain biking on specified trails. The areas pro-

posed as “Roadless, Other” on this map would be open to all of those uses, and could also be open to motorized recreation including motorcycles and ATVs on specified trails, 4x4s on specified “4WD” routes, and snowmobiles in specified areas and routes. It remains to be seen whether the dam proponents will advocate for land protections within the proposed NCRAs that are more consistent with the Sierra Club/NCCC/ALPS map of recommended Wilderness and other land designations.

As many organizations said throughout 2012, the NRA Proposal in the Yakima Plan process undermines the ongoing National Forest processes (OWNF Forest Plan Revision and OWNF Travel Management) and poses numerous threats to the ecosystem, watersheds, and non-motorized recreational opportunities. This is true of the re-dubbed NCRA Proposal as well as the original January 2012 NRA Proposal. Designation of motorized and non-motorized routes and areas should be moved out of the Yakima Plan and into the existing National Forest regulatory process, where it belongs.

At the start of the Ross process, one of the dam proponents admitted that from an ecosystem perspective, it would be “untenable” to maintain the current levels of off-road vehicle use on these lands, let alone increase those levels, i.e., ORV use levels need to be reduced in the NCRAs. Unfortunately, after the four-month Ross process, the dam proponents have still not articulated how they would go about providing for reduced levels of ORV use on those lands. Instead, their proposed NCRA management plan stakeholder-process description contains much language that seems to capitulate to ORV use on the former hiker-horse trails of these roadless areas. Furthermore, the Yakima Plan’s Final EIS says that the purpose of the “National Recreation” designation is to “attract more users.”

NCCC believes we have a better chance to reduce current levels of ORV use if we keep these designation decisions in the National Forest administrative processes, rather than putting a National Recreation label on them in a statute passed by Congress with a subsequent multi-stakeholder process that will draw ORV users out in force, due to the National Recreation label. By making the stakes so much higher for ORV users, the National Recreation label helps them to mobilize and fight for every foot of trail open to ORVs. Consequently, those in our community who want to reduce current levels of ORV use are being



set up for failure by the proposed NCRA legislation.

As the Ross process concludes, it is worth reiterating the process defects we reported in the Summer/Fall *TWC*. Several important discussion topics proposed by NCCC were deemed by the BuRec-funded facilitator to be “outside of the scope of this process,” and thus “will not be discussed” and “I will not be considering them as I assist the Workgroup.” These banned topics included the lack of opportunity for public comment on the NRA proposal; reasons for leaving ORV designations in the National Forest planning processes; ways that ORV designations in the Yakima Plan would set a bad precedent and negatively impact future lands protection efforts in Washington and nationally; risks of negative changes during the legislative process; and policy reasons for opposing statutory mandates for ORV use in lands legislation. In addition, the facilitator took all discussion of a new Bumping Lake dam off the table, even though two mentions of Bumping Lake popped up in the summary distributed at the final meeting. Banning those topics from the Ross process precluded a full discussion, and the conservation community still needs to have that discussion.

Yakima Plan makes run for State funding

The dam proponents and Governor Inslee, who is making new dams the first centerpiece of his grow-the-economy platform, also launched State legislation

Motorcycles on South Fork Taneum Trail.

—KARL FORSGAARD PHOTO

at hearings in the House Capital Budget Committee and Agriculture & Natural Resources Committee, lobbying for millions of dollars as a down payment on the Yakima Plan’s current estimated price tag of \$5 billion.

The State Legislature is now considering bills (HB 1088 and 1089) for capital budget expenditures of \$23 million this year for “Early Action” items in the Yakima Plan. Some of these budget items such as water conservation measures, Kachess inactive storage, and the Keechelus-to-Kachess water storage pipeline might be supportable after EIS review, while others such as geologic investigations for the new dams might be opposed by NCCC, Sierra Club and the other opponents of the Bumping and Wymer dams. In January 2013, Sierra Club and Friends of Bumping Lake testified before the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee against HB 1196, Ecology’s request bill to have the Legislature rubberstamp the Yakima Plan, including new dams and new ORV problems on National Forest lands. On January 24, newly elected Governor Inslee made a similar bill (HB 1414) the first executive request legislation of his administration, and called it the “Yakima River Basin Water, Jobs and Fish” bill.

Also in January 2013, NCCC signed onto Sierra Club testimony before the Capital

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Budget Committee on HB 1088 and 1089, opposing new dam study funding and calling for an audit of the Columbia River basin water supply development account to determine whether future expenditures from this account are warranted and have a positive benefit/cost ratio. In its 2012 report the Green Scissors Campaign, a national coalition, identified both the proposed Bumping and Wymer dams as wasteful government projects that should not be funded in the federal budget.

BuRec did a federal benefit/cost analysis on two versions of a Wymer dam back in 2008. The most “favorable” alternative showed a (losing) benefit/cost ratio of 0.31. Bumping has not had a benefit/cost analysis done since about 40 years ago, and that was on a different size dam. Despite Wymer’s extremely unfavorable economics and the lack of updated Bumping analysis, Governor Gregoire and Ecology resurrected both projects. Now BuRec has calculated “benefits” on the entire Yakima Plan. They have tallied over \$7 billion dollars of alleged fish “benefits” (by plugging in what people might voluntarily pay to have more salmon) so that they can offset the Yakima Plan costs which run over \$5 billion (of which the costs of the two dams

are over \$1.5 billion and growing).

In November, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service designated Critical Habitat for the Northern Spotted Owl under the Endangered Species Act, including ancient forest at the shoreline of Bumping Lake – which would be inundated and destroyed if the proposed new dam is built.

While battling against the worst elements of the Yakima Plan, NCCC continues to advocate for a new OWN Forest Plan and OWN Travel Management Plan that are consistent with the Sierra Club/NCCC/ALPS map of recommended Wilderness and other land designations, followed by Congressional enactment of those Wildernesses, including the ancient forest of Bumping Lake as well as places outside the Yakima Basin like the North Fork Entiat, Mad River, Chelan-Sawtooth, Liberty Bell and Golden Horn roadless areas.

What you can do:

Send Governor Inslee a strong message:

- Support water conservation and water banking in the Yakima basin.
- Oppose new money-losing dams in the Yakima Basin.

- Oppose new off-road vehicle designations in the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest outside of the existing National Forest planning process.
- Support Wilderness protection for roadless areas in the Yakima Basin, including the ancient forest surrounding the existing Bumping Lake.

Comments may be sent through the following website: <http://www.governor.wa.gov/contact/default.asp>

¹A March 11, 2012 letter detailing numerous substantive and procedural objections to the NRA Proposal was signed by these 26 organizations: Alpine Lakes Protection Society; Aqua Permanente; Center for Biological Diversity; CELP; El Sendero; Endangered Species Coalition; Federation of Western Outdoor Clubs; Friends of Bumping Lake; Friends of the Earth; Friends of the Teanaway; Friends of Wild Sky; Issaquah Alps Trails Club; Kittitas Audubon Society; Kittitas County Conservation Coalition; Mazamas; MidFORC; North Cascades Conservation Council; Olympic Forest Coalition; Seattle Audubon Society; Sierra Club; Washington Native Plant Society; Wenatchee Mountains Coalition; Western Lands Project; Western Watersheds Project; Wilderness Watch; and Wildlands CPR. A separate March 13, 2012 letter expressing similar concerns, including that the NRA Proposal “undermines” the National Forest planning processes, was signed by American Whitewater; The Mountaineers; and Washington Wild. None of these 29 organizations has become a supporter of the Yakima Plan.



Newly designated critical habitat for northern spotted owls at west end of Bumping Lake. —KARL FORSGAARD PHOTO