

[NOTE: The following article appeared nearly 25 years and provides background on the Yakima River Basin Water Enhancement Project (YRPWEP).]

Washington Wildlife  
[Washington Wilderness Coalition]  
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“Yakima Basin Needs Watershed Planning”

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The Yakima River Basin encompasses about 6,100 square miles in south-central Washington. It is the home of what was once a magnificent run of half-a-million spring Chinook salmon. But the salmon are mostly gone now, decimated by the dams built over the years by the Bureau of Reclamation to meet the clamoring demands of irrigators raising hay and apples.

The basis of life in the Yakima Basin is water rights, both for the remnant fish and for the irrigators. The theme of Western Water Law has been -- first in time, first in right, first in court. In low water years, like 1977, irrigation districts have had first call on diversions, leaving the fish high and dry. In good water years, water sat in Bureau of Reclamation reservoirs rather than providing instream flows for spawning salmon.

The water rights issue is complicated by several factors. One is that the irrigation districts are split under a 1945 court consent decree between those districts which are guaranteed 100 percent of their water allocation, like the Sunnyside district, and those, like the Roza, which received a percentage basis in low water years. In addition, in a recent challenge to pro-irrigator allocations, the 1.4 million acre Yakima [Yakama] Indian Nation establish certain rights under their treaty similar to the Boldt Decision, and have begun to exercise those rights on behalf of the fish.

Many resource agencies, such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service have given up efforts to establish instream flows adequate for salmon under the existing system under which the irrigation districts control, and waste the water flow in the Yakima. These agencies believe that the only way to ensure instream flows is to have their own pool of water to be traded with the irrigators when needed. Hence the idea of “dams for fish”.

The Bumping Lake Enlargement, a many decades old proposal to expand an existing dam near Goose Prairie, Washington, was selected as a test case in the mid-70s. The Bureau of Reclamation could no longer justify constructing dams based on irrigation benefits alone. For their part, the resource agencies were delighted. A large percentage of the “new” water from Bumping was earmarked for supplemental irrigation to districts which did not receive a full allotment in low water years.

But the Bureau had not done its homework. Friends of the Earth learned that flood control and recreation benefits were claimed but never justified, the water supply figures for filling of Bumping were faulty, an inadequate feasibility study was released and, to top it off, the Dept. of Interior Solicitor's Office issued an opinion stating that in low water years, the irrigators could lay claim to all the water in the basin anyway.

Congress refused to fund the Bumping Enlargement. Instead, in 1979, Congress authorized a feasibility study by the Dept. of Interior of the Yakima River Basin Enhancement Project. [P.L. 96-162]

The Enhancement Project is an attempt to find a mix of features to meet the needs of instream flows, new irrigation for the Yakima [Yakama] Indian Nation and supplemental irrigation for the water deficient districts. In January of 1986 the Bureau of Reclamation and the Washington Department of Ecology (DOE) released four plans. The major differences in the plans revolve around whether the Bumping Enlargement is included or not, or whether some other dam for fish should be built. The Bureau and DOE, without explanation, dropped a total nonstorage plan, prepared in 1985, under which all of the five major irrigation districts would receive an irrigation supply of 70 percent or more of their 10-year average diversions. According to this plan, maximum nonstorage would dramatically improve the low adverse flows in the upper Yakima and lower Yakima River reaches for instream flows.

Attempts to implement water conservation have been hampered by the irrigation districts' refusal to comply with P.L. 97-293, Sec. 390jj(b) which requires each irrigation district to develop a water conservation plan which shall contain definite goals, appropriate water conservation measures, and a time schedule for meeting the water conservation objectives. This provision was also incorporated into the N.W. Regional Power Planning Council's 1984 Fish and Wildlife Program.

While no clear Yakima River Basin Enhancement Project has yet emerged and no Federal or state environmental impact statement has been prepared, several items for early implementation are none-the-less going forward. Improvement of fish passage and protective facilities at about 20 sites was begun in 1984, thanks to the efforts of Senator Evans and Representative Morrison. They were able to obtain legislative language clarifying Federal agency funding of these facilities. On June 5 of this year [1986], Senator Evans introduced S. 2519 to authorize some "non-structural" projects in the Yakima Basin to promote water conservation.

A basin includes the entire watershed, and much of the Yakima Basin lies within the Wenatchee National Forest. A proposed Land Use Plan and DEIS for this National Forest has just been released. The Forest Service's preferred alternative would increase annual water yield 13,300, 19,100, and 23,900 acre-feet in the first, second, and fifth decades of the plan. Yet, the Forest Service makes no effort to determine when this increased water yield will take place. If it occurs during times of peak runoff in spring, this water yield will be wasted. If, however, water yields from the forest could be

delayed longer into summer, by retarding snow melt, instream flows would receive additional benefits.

As Amory Lovins has said, "Water policy is repeating the same mistakes made with energy. They're assuming we need more water, rather than efficient use of existing water." The question in the Yakima River Basin is can this watershed be a prototype for forest planning and water conservation?

WHAT YOU CAN DO: Write to Senator Dan Evens, U.S. Senate, WA D.C. 20510. Support S. 2519 and urge that additional water conservation elements be looked at. Oppose the Bumping Lake Enlargement Project. Comments on the Wenatchee National Forest DEIS and ask how the Forest Service timber harvest plans will impact instream flows in the Yakima River.

[NOTE: The Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest will be releasing a draft updated Forest Plan in 2010.]