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Yakima River Basin Water Enhancement Project (YRBWEP)

2009 Workgroup

Meeting Notes

July 29, 2009

The meeting was primarily devoted to the elements of the Yakima River Basin Integrated Water Resources Management Alternative EIS that were related to water marketing and fish issues.

Market-Based Reallocation of Water Resources

Mary McCrea of the Cascadia Law Group reviewed the research that she and Ernie Niemi of Eco Northwest had conducted of water marketing options and its applicability in the Yakima Basin. The goals of this work were: (1) to increase flexibility for voluntary reallocation from low-value use to higher-value use, (2) to reduce costs and delays of transactions, and (3) to consider impacts on third parties, e.g., taking land out of production. Mary noted that the Yakima basin has been the busy part of the state for water marketing and water banking. Water marketing options are not just for instream flow; they could also be used to assist municipal or irrigation needs. Water placed in trust or banked is not subject to relinquishment. The Workgroup discussed how it might determine how much water was potentially available during a drought from this option and the difficulties of articulating a value for water. Workgroup members and members of the audience also discussed how to make water marketing a more attractive option to irrigators.

Direct Pumping Option

Derek Sandison of Ecology reviewed the EIS discussion of direct pumping from the Columbia River. This option would allow for pumping water on demand from the Columbia River, thereby reducing demand on Yakima River water. This option typically involves high capital and operation and maintenance costs. There is some question whether direct pumping is legal without further congressional authorization. The Workgroup discussed whether there could be some flexibility in the restrictions on taking Columbia River water if there was a higher benefit to fish in the Yakima River.

Fish Passage

Dave Fast of the Yakama Nation provided an overview of fish runs, historically and under current conditions. The Yakima River basin historically has been home to a diverse set of salmonid species, including spring, summer, and fall Chinook; coho; steelhead; and sockeye. Historical runs are estimated in aggregate between a low of 408,000 and a high of 1,050,000 fish. Modern numbers have varied between 1,910 and 43,975 fish annually. The Yakima/Klickitat Fisheries Project has supplemented and restored several runs of fish, and developed a new hatchery in 1997. These efforts have led to increased populations in recent years. Evidence is clear that spikes in flow provide encouragement to fish to outwardly migrate.



Wendy Christensen of the Bureau of Reclamation reviewed existing mainstem passage on the Yakima River from the mouth to Easton Dam and on the Naches River from the mouth to Yakima-Tieton Diversion Dam that has occurred as part of YRBWEP Phase I. Currently, Reclamation is conducting a feasibility study for providing fish passage at five Yakima Project storage dams. The study is part of a Mitigation Agreement with Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife and a Settlement Agreement with the Yakama Nation. Although passage at all dams is deemed technically feasible, the Yakima Storage Dams Fish Passage core team has selected Cle Elum and Bumping Dams for further study. A Planning Report for Cle Elum and Bumping Lake Dams was issued in September 2008. Final NEPA/SEPA compliance has begun on the Cle Elum Dam Fish Passage Facilities and Fish Reintroduction Project with a Final EIS due in February 2011. Final Designs for Cle Elum are scheduled for fiscal year 2013.

Chris Lynch of the Bureau of Reclamation explained that operations at Cle Elum Dam with proposed fish facilities in place would have no effect on Reclamation's ability to meet current water contracts or TWSA. Chris also described ongoing fish passage work at the Roza Dam – Roza roller gate modifications. As part of the American Recovery and Rehabilitation Act, a series of weirs will be installed on top of the right roller gate so more fish will be attracted for safer downstream passage at the surface with less need for power subordination.

John Easterbrooks of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife reviewed fish passage activities in the tributaries of the Yakima and Naches Rivers. Beautiful habitat has been restored to fish at Big, Cowiche and Taneum Creeks. Work to restore passage is underway at Manastash, Reecer, and lower Wilson Creeks. Nanuem and Wenas Creeks are still blocked. The efforts have been so successful that the parties have nearly completed their work on unscreened facilities in the accessible tributaries.

Fish Habitat Enhancement

Alex Conley of the Yakima Basin Fish and Wildlife Recovery Board provided a short history of fish habitat enhancement projects in the Basin. The 1980s were a time of tribal lawsuits, the initial implementation of the Northwest Power and Conservation Act, prioritized fish screening at major diversions, and establishment of the "Flip Flop" strategy. Efforts in the 1990s led to the establishment of minimum flows, emergence of the YRBWEP, investment of funding from the Bonneville Power Administration, and significant investments in irrigation conservation and system improvements. In the current decade, there are new funding sources, a more developed range of experience people and program, strategic planning to guide investments, and more attention to the Endangered Species Act. The primary funding sources for fish habitat enhancement in the basin are the BPA/NPCC Fish and Wildlife Program, Reclamation's YRBWEP Program, and the State's SRFB funding program. The next steps are outlined in a set of strategic plans.

John Easterbrooks described flow effects on habitat. There is a range of effects from irrigation operations, depending on different circumstances, including: lower winter flows below the reservoirs, unnaturally high flows during irrigation season, less access to tributaries and small channels, low summer flows due to diversions, temperature effects on upstream migration, and reduced flow during spring migration. John described the value of creating complex floodplain habitat to help mitigate these effects.

Joel Freudenthal of Yakima County then described floodplain restoration in more detail. A conundrum in restoring floodplains is that the same geographic area that might assist fish survival is also where most of the population lives and where some of the greatest amount of irrigation occurs. Some historical

changes in the floodplain have cut off the release of sediments downstream, which can negatively affect salmon habitat. Another impact of irrigation is that it leads to a higher water table in the summer and few plants can handle the effects of the water table rising through the summer. While the 1996 flood posed a number of problems to the community, it was a boon in many ways to fish habitat, for example, it led to valuable deposits of gravel for fish. For floodplain restoration to work best, large land areas need to be under common management. The best example of this is the 21,000 acres on the Yakama Reservation being managed for floodplain habitat.

John Marvin of the Yakama Nation described certain habitat improvement activities in the Yakima/Klickitat Fisheries Program and the Yakima Tributary Access and Habitat Program. These programs have provided an array of habitat improvements applied widely in the Basin.

Alex Conley reviewed the proposed Habitat Enhancement Alternative in the EIS. The projects have not been prioritized. A basic challenge is to balance the value of habitat corridors in dynamic creeks and economic development in those same geographic areas. There is now an impressive record of cooperation in the Basin working through these tradeoffs. There is a need to link strategic planning with future project activities. There is also a need to create a habitat protection program which is more responsive to emerging opportunities.

Derek Sandison summarized the fish-related activities described in the EIS. The bottom line is that an integrated approach provides much greater benefits to fish than any individual element.

Strengths, Weaknesses and Questions about the Seven Elements

The Workgroup then engaged in a lengthy discussion of the strengths and weaknesses that emerged from their review of the seven elements of the Integrated Water Resources Management Alternative. This discussion was captured on flipcharts and reported in an attachment to these minutes.

Members in attendance:

Brad Avy, Washington Department of Agriculture
Dale Bambrick, NOAA Fisheries Service
Max Benitz, Benton County Commission
Dave Brown, City of Yakima (alt.)
Alex Conley, Yakima Basin Fish & Wildlife Recovery Board
Rick Dieker, Yakima-Tieton Irrigation District
Michael Garrity, American Rivers
Urban Eberhart, Kittitas Reclamation District
Dave Fast, Yakama Nation – Yakima/Klickitat Fisheries Project
Paul Jewell, Kittitas County (alt.)
Mike Leita, Yakima County Commission
Sid Morrison, Yakima Basin Storage Alliance
Phil Rigdon, Yakama Nation - Natural Resources
Derek Sandison, Washington Department of Ecology
Jeff Tayer, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife
Jeff Thomas, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Ron VanGundy, Roza Irrigation District
Dawn Wiedmeier, Bureau of Reclamation