

WATER RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

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Introduction

Over the past 10 years I have learned how difficult it is to address and plan for improved water supply, in the Yakima basin, with the multitude of players and interests involved. The Yakima River Basin Watershed Enhancement Program (YRBWEP) Work Group has one chance to get it right. The current DRAFT Integrated Management Plan (IMP) has a menu of helpful and supportable projects. However it is neither a comprehensive plan, in addressing key basin issues, nor a plan, in its current form, that warrants state or federal funding. My hope is that the Work Group will take the time to get it right. That will require additional time and changes to the current DRAFT.

Goals

Current goals of Reclamation, as I heard expressed recently by Commissioner Michael Conner, are to provide for certainty and sustainability in water supply and environmental issues. This includes solving problems, economic benefits, conservation, addressing climate change and river/fisheries restoration. Water right settlements are a part of this agenda. The current IMP does not provide such comprehensive solutions and has not even talked about settling groundwater issues. Therefore the current IMP does not provide certainty nor sustainable for future water management or fisheries in the Yakima basin.

Goal Setting

This leads to the question of how the current YRBWEP Work Group process can solve a problem they have not yet defined? The current process is a “satisficing process” in that it appears to minimize water needs and not look to comprehensive solutions. The three Counties, in a recent letter, expressed their reservations for the process as it moves forward. Rightly so! While everyone is still at the table it is an uneasy situation with no certain outcomes. There are those satisfied with some progress and others looking for more comprehensive solutions.

Defining the entire problem is the first step to a completing and satisfactory plan. This may be our last chance at a comprehensive solution. We do not need a partial solution for some of the players. We need a comprehensive and complete solution that meets the needs of all basin water users.

Groundwater

The basin has waited for 10 years for the comprehensive technical information the USGS has now provided on the inter play between surface and groundwater specific to the Yakima basin. This information is all but being ignored in the IWP Work Group. Water resources can not be properly planned for and managed, in the Yakima basin, without comprehensively integrating groundwater management. Ecology, having approved the Watershed Management Plan, Yakima River Basin, 2003 has little leeway in advancing the IMP without including groundwater and addressing the current “crisis by management” of exempt wells in Kittitas County and the rest of the basin.

Exempt wells in the upper Kittitas County are only a small fraction of the 530,000 acre-feet (USGS) of groundwater use in the basin. Nearly all groundwater uses are junior to time immemorial rights and the 1905, Yakima Project. The USGS study tells us that these groundwater withdrawals are, to some degree, contributing to the diminishing of in stream flows and senior water rights. The USGS groundwater study proposes management of surface and groundwater as two manifestations of a single resource. Yet the IMP Work Group has not addressed these critical groundwater issues in there water planning.

The Yakima River Basin Watershed Plan, 2003, (Plan) proposed “Major new supply” without any recommendation for interim exempt well regulation. It is unfair to the citizens of Upper Kittitas County to bear the burden of this basin wide problem. Ecology is in violation of their approval of the Plan by their “moratorium.”

Ecology’s “moratorium” and the larger issue of groundwater usage casts a very large economic black cloud over all exempt wells and all groundwater rights and associated property rights in the entire basin. This is the real “crisis” in water management that no one wants to talk about because of the potential for basin wide groundwater regulation. This is the compelling reason for taking the time required to develop a complete and comprehensive water plan including a settlement of groundwater issues.

Selling Points

Why would the state and federal government invest billions of dollars to improve water supply in the Yakima Basin without comprehensively solving water management issues in the basin? It would be a disaster if an expensive package of projects were built only to be followed by a subsequent legal challenge (groundwater adjudication) to groundwater usage in the basin. I would propose that State and Federal taxpayer money, for implementation of the IMP, is justified by four basic elements: 1) increased economic stability for agriculture in the basin, 2) a clear path forward for water management in the basin (certainty), 3) fisheries mitigation for the Yakima Project for the insults of the past and water needs of the next century, and 4) the ability to better address global warming (sustainability).

Agriculture

The agricultural community has a clearly defined a goal of 70% minimum pro-ratable water supply in order to provide a improved degree of economic stability for the future. This goal has a solid basis in drought definition and has been presented in the Watershed Council Plan and Yakima Basin Plan. Agriculture is looking at this Integrated Management Plan as a once in a lifetime opportunity to put together sufficient water projects and actions to meet their goals.

Municipal

The IMP provides for future water supply, to be provided through the conjunctive use of surface and groundwater. However, by avoiding the implications of the USGS study, the IMP does nothing to provide certainty to municipalities. Municipalities need certainty that their future use of existing groundwater supplies or inchoate rights, that are post 1905, will not be challenged and will be

sustainable. Without a settlement of this issue municipalities in the basin are left to future court battles.

Fisheries

It has been said that with out a vision the people perish. It should be said that without a vision for the fisheries the fish will perish. Fisheries interests have never set goals for fisheries restoration and the flows required to support restoration. Fisheries representatives have expressing interest in not being hurt by the achievement of the agricultural/municipal goals for new water supply. A fisheries goal of mitigation for past insults, of the Yakima Project, and future projects has not been voiced. A biological opinion would be helpful for listed species but still not address reintroduction and optimization needs.

Instream flows, in drought years, have still not been defined or optimized for the reintroduction of extinct fish species and their biological needs. The Watershed Council and the Watershed Plan both provided for fish flows in critical years. Reducing Flip-Flop flows “to the extent possible” is not a biologically defined or measurable objective. That is why YBSA and the counties are still working for a complete solution that may include Columbia River water. Skepticism exists for the building of a Bumping Lake enlargement. This is well founded based upon past history and environmental issues that have been voiced. It is difficult to see how we can get to “Major new supply” without Bumping and without Columbia River water supply. Modeling needs to be consistent in levels of drawdown used in different scenarios.

The instream flow concepts, the methodologies and tools for fisheries optimization have been available since the early 1970’s. Now the much more robust power of the computer is available to further model and optimize such application. Yet the very concepts of fisheries flow needs in drought years are not addressed by the IMP and fisheries modeling. The opportunity for mitigation for the Yakima Project is a once in a lifetime opportunity being lost. This will make the plan and other fisheries elements even more difficult to fund as the critical element of instream flows are not being provided.

Climate change

The planning process has just seen the first results of different scenarios of future climate change. More frequent drought and more severe droughts are forecast, even by the moderate scenario. The fisheries community has not addressed these issues or the implications of current or future declines in instream flows due to drought conditions made more frequent and severe by climate change. USGS results of impacts from current and future groundwater withdrawals have not been integrated with climate change scenarios.

Discussion

There has been criticism of past studies on the economics benefits of a more stable agricultural water supply for the Yakima basin. This need for agricultural drought year water, alone, can not justify the expenditures of the IMP.

If the Plan were to proceed as is, it would be disastrous, to be faced, in the future, with a request for groundwater adjudication and the integration of groundwater and surface water priorities. A large black cloud sits over, not only Upper Kittitas County, but the entire Yakima basin for the allocation of water and drilling of wells since 1905. Municipalities, other than Yakima and CleElum, have no firm surface water supply! This is unacceptable! A Water Management “settlement” for the past and supply for the future needs to be a major selling point for outside funding.

There can be no clear pathway forward on surface water and groundwater management in the Yakima basin without this integration of the, now available, 10 year USGS groundwater study. This study has not been integrated into the Plan for the implications of diminished flows for fisheries. There appears to be no “fisheries vision” for basin wide mitigation for past and future out of stream water needs. Without addressing global warming and changing flows, timing and frequency of drought, important to fisheries for the future, there can be no certainty for fisheries recovery much less restoration and little support for large expenditures of state and federal tax dollars. This could cause additional stress on the agricultural community that has worked actively to address ESA issues.

The Yakima Project has resulted in numerous issues, such as low flows from diversions and power production and high flows detrimental to fisheries production. Fisheries management, such as flip-flop has added additional stresses and tradeoffs. These major issues have not been mitigated by the IMP. Additionally, there appears to be resistance to addressing the impact of exotic fish species predation on salmonids in the lower Yakima River. Bird predation and mitigation flows, in the lower Yakima and Selah reach, have not been addressed. Fish passage at Rimrock Dam can not be economically justified without addressing flip-flop and optimum flows for future fisheries in the Tieton and Naches Rivers. “Doing no harm” and “incremental flow improvements” during non drought years, without fish species production enhancement, does not justify such expenditures.

Conclusions

Let’s move forward on a complete and comprehensive package that includes all of the key issues and potential elements of a complete project and groundwater settlement for the basin. This needs to include not only drought year agricultural water supply but firm municipal/Industrial and rural water supply for economic growth (including mitigation and settlement for past and future groundwater use), fisheries enhancement flows, and provisions for climate change. Plan projects needs to mitigate for the entire Yakima Project and provide mitigation and a settlement of water issues of the basin worthy of the state and federal financing it will require.

I believe that we have a long way to go before the IMP addresses the water management issues critical to the future of the Yakima basin and provides the justification for the large expenditures requested. I would challenge you to take on these issues and not support the IMP, in its current form.

Sincerely,

Jim Milton