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Meeting Notes

Yakima River Basin Water Enhancement Project Workgroup

September 10, 2025
In-person and Teams Virtual Meeting

Welcome, Introductions, and Agenda Overview

Anna Marandi with HDR Engineering, Inc. (HDR) welcomed the Yakima River Basin Water Enhancement Project (YRBWEP) Workgroup members and other attendees participating virtually and in-person. The following notes summarize the YRBWEP Workgroup presentations and public comments. For more information, please see the full presentations on the Yakima Basin Integrated Plan (YBIP) website: [Yakima Basin Integrated Plan](#).

Executive and Implementation Committee Updates

Presenters: Chad Stuart, *Reclamation*; Larry Mattson, *OCR/ Ecology*; Phil Rigdon, *Yakama Nation*

Chad Stuart provided an update for the Workgroup. Staffing and budget issues have not changed and hiring freezes are still in effect, but they're getting through it. Currently, at 40%, this is the third worst drought that they have seen. It has been a challenging year for fish and people, but he appreciates the partnerships with this group, our transparency, honesty, and the group's adaptability. Chad wanted to highlight a successful update about Cle Elum and shared a live feed of the construction of the adult collection facility. It has been a challenge, but the facility will be fully operational by Spring 2026.

Larry Mattson shared that the most important skills needed for this job that his predecessors had were creativity, drive, and diplomacy, and seeing the network in a great mood is wonderful despite high stress levels. He attended Benton County's Water Stargrass Coalition tour and was able to see the stargrass firsthand in the basin and appreciates all the efforts that the partners are doing to remove it including Benton County, Benton Conservation District, Yakama Nation, WDFW, and many other groups. He is looking forward to more strategy.

Phil Rigdon recognized Yakama Nation's Hope for Life Day, and the importance of our work in the basin to the Nation which is creating change for the community. He was happy that so many Yakama Nation staff are in attendance and that their work will be featured today. He noted that Yakama Nation continues to support all their partners and appreciates the support and partnership of the Workgroup, especially during a challenging third year of drought, fires, and impacts to agriculture. He expressed gratitude for efforts such as the Bateman Island Causeway removal are critical, and that the Stargrass Coalition is also doing great work.

Reclamation Regional Director Introduction and Q&A

Presenter: Roland Springer, *Bureau of Reclamation*

Roland shared that Reclamation is committed to being part of this Workgroup. He also recognized the importance of our work and Hope for Life Day for the Yakama Nation, as well as all the efforts of YBIP and how unique it is. Roland's background is in civil engineering, and he comes from a farming family. During his early career he worked on issues on the Colorado River, and he recognized the importance of water for tribes, agriculture, and communities. He also spent time working in Washington, D.C. and then returned to the Pacific Northwest. He shared a deep love for water work and reflected on the land use changes in the West – losing farmland to developments, environmental and climate pressures, and acknowledged how much he has learned about water from tribes in Idaho. He reiterated that Reclamation is committed to working together on this project. He brought two additional guests from Reclamation and introduced them: Jen Johnson, Acting Deputy Regional Director and Melinda Hernandez Burke, Native American Affairs Program Coordinator.

Alex Conley asked about the lessons that Mr. Springer has learned from his experience with the Snake River project. Roland replied that the Snake River is organized differently because it's a surface water and ground water challenge but also noted that the Integrated Plan is actually a great example for the Snake River folks since it demonstrates how diverse partners and water users can work together.

Toppenish Fan Update

Presenter: Audrey Scott, *Yakama Nation Fisheries*

Audrey Scott shared updates on the Toppenish Fan/ Pom Pom Road project. This project is near White Swan, where a devastating fire last year destroyed several tribal member homes on the Yakama Nation Reservation. Toppenish Creek is a tributary to the Yakima River with many issues at the project site including severe incision, lack of water availability and low flows during summer and fall, high water temperatures affecting Steelhead rearing and habitat, and lack of cover. Resident fish are at risk in this area. During Phase 1 (November- December 2025) they will create 3 new 21-ft precast concrete box culverts to increase flood conveyance. Phase 2 (June 2026 - Dec 2026) will restore connections to historic floodplain channels, placing log jams and post-assisted log structures, plugging existing alignment of Toppenish Creek and revegetating fire disturbed areas and riparian habitats. There are a multitude of funding agencies to support implementation and the restoration of Steelhead populations. The current state of the creek is very low to no flow in the middle of the section. After this project, it will improve flow and create 4.2 miles of quality habitat. Unfortunately, the Slide Ranch Fire affected the project area and forced the team to redo the modeling and recreate restoration design changes and bridge/road design changes.

Audrey thanked the funding agencies, Yakama Nation, and Madeleine Eckmann (PM). Audrey took questions after her presentation.

Q: *Will rerouting the channel impact the relationships between the hydraulic gates and the canals?*

A: The interplay between irrigation canals and new channels will not have a role, and there is no change in how the creek is aligned now.

Comment: A member requested a site visit. They are excited to see how the site will take off, especially since there is regeneration post-fire.

Q: *Were there complications linked to another project farther downstream? Where are they getting materials from?*

A: There is another project on Toppenish that is increasing local groundwater tables. This project is removing a levee which is where they are getting materials for the Pom Pom project.

Q: *Will the old bridge remain?*

A: Yes, the old bridge will remain. The old channel is not frequently activated but we want to keep it for flood conveyance.

Yakama Nation Welcome

Presenters: Phil Rigdon, *Yakama Nation Department of Natural Resources* and Tribal Council Member Jeremy Takala, *Yakama Nation*

Phil shared that the Yakama Nation is tied to the river, to the water, and that the water is foundational to their people. Phil presented the group with background about Treaty Rights from 1855 and how Article III gives the Yakama Nation the right to hunt, fish, and gather; and it is protected throughout the ceded and usual and accustomed use areas. He talked about fishing and the fish wars throughout the years, especially with ensuring access to fishing sites. These lawsuits encouraged the Nation to begin their own programs and hire their own fish biologists and foresters to create a fisheries program. Although they had won the right to fish in court, the fish were not returning.

From 1905 to 1951, Reclamation expanded operations to serve six irrigation districts. Throughout these years, fish passage was impacted due to dams. Phil proceeded to talk about how droughts have impacted their fisheries. Juvenile fish numbers have not recovered from the 2015 drought. Year over year droughts place the viability of entire populations at risk.

Phil shared how Salmon and water were the first story and continue to be the Nation's responsibility. The tribe continues to advocate for water for fish.

Phil responded to questions after his presentation:

Q: *How is the work coming along on the farm?*

A: Having a farm in a drought year is hard, but he's excited to see their work in a new place, food sovereignty, and providing food to the community.

Q: *The drought numbers seemed high, where did the data come from and why did they increase in 2000?*

A: In the early 90's there was a three-year drought, and then by 2000 there was a rise due to the impact of the tribe's work and advancing technology. They also added 3 fish stocks to the basin during this time.

Yakama Nation Tribal Council Member Jeremy Takala shared that Hope for Life Day was initially proposed by their Youth Council. It is a day to recognize suicide prevention and awareness about the suicide crisis in Indigenous communities. Many stories were shared at the event (which was happening simultaneously) and there was a lot of emotion. He spoke about how difficult suicide is as an issue and when it comes to first foods, it's a traditional tool – a medicine. It helps the Yakama Nation get through challenging times. The tribe's goal is to preserve these first foods and endemic plant species since they are threatened by the drought. A memorial doesn't happen until a year after a death so it's important that these plants are still around so they can share a meal and perform ceremonies.

Public Comments

David Ortman: see attached PDF

Irrigation Water Supply Update

Presenter: Graysen Squeochs, *Wapato Irrigation Project/Yakama Nation Engineering*; Sage Park, *Roza Irrigation District*; Urban Eberhart, *Kittitas Reclamation District*

Graysen Squeochs described the 2025 drought impacts to the Wapato Irrigation Project. The team employed drought countermeasures where areas were on a *six days on* and *three days off* schedule. This rotation has been successful in the last few years when they experience water storage issues. They are also continuing to repair drain stations and deploy auxiliary submersible pumps. Growers have been stressed due to water availability, diminished crop yield, and production quality. Infrastructure is also strained: a control gate failure required the installation of a temporary dam.

Staffing shortages have complicated operations, especially with responding to some of these emergency situations. They are reassessing maintenance projects due to financial constraints but are trying to implement projects as quickly as possible.

Graysen also gave a technical explanation of the infrastructure solutions that they created to address these emergencies. They are working on designs to work on a hybridized diversion point.

Sage Park shared that they shut down the canals for 10 days. However, growers wanted the canals back on because the temperature was beginning to rise. Roza leased around 9000K acre-feet of water, but because of a dried tributary and shutting down early, they can't access that water so it will be left in-stream. They will officially shut down on the morning of 9/23. Their team watches the canal 24/7 and has been keeping in touch with watermasters to ensure transparent communication continues.

Sage presented the group with photos of the empty canal in May, which caused some cracks. Growers have been installing more drip lines and systems so they can water their remaining crops. Additionally, crops are harvested a week earlier since it's been hot.

Urban Eberhart shared that Reclamation's original forecast for 2025 was 58% but then it was reduced to 48% in May and then down to 40% in September. KRD would usually shut down by October 15, however, KRD has already shut down on August 13. Their current priority is building a climate-resilient system. As part of their construction update, KRD has been opening canals with concrete overlay and installing pipes. Their priority is protecting their economy and the certainty of the water supply for the future of farms, fish, and the ecosystem.

Lower River Project Updates

Presenter: Mike Porter, *Yakama Nation Fisheries*

Mike is the lower Yakima River project coordinator and began by emphasizing the cultural importance of the Yakima River. Historically, there were significant Yakama fisheries at Prosser, where natural falls created harvest opportunities, and there were large villages and populations at Parker. Mike shared a slide of juvenile survival and shared that by the time juveniles get to the lower river their survival rate decreases. The group has a strong vision and goals for the river including healthy salmon and harvestable stocks of all species, and infrastructure exerting minimal impacts on fish populations. Additionally, flow, habitat, predation rates, and water quality would support abundant migration and spawning. The integrated approach with partnerships will be key to achieving these goals.

Mike also provided specific project updates and possible improvements: at Prosser Dam and Diversion, if they open one headgate wider and close the rest, this will immediately improve fish passage and survival. They are continuing to fine tune this process; at the Wapato Dam and Diversion, they are anticipating a feasibility report in early 2026. The fish passage is inadequate, and many fish are dying. They have secured funding to address this issue.

Some key elements for this project include headworks replacement, nature-like fishways, adjustable crest with gates, and channel restoration. At Wanawish Dam, they haven't tied the losses of smolts to water diversion itself. They are also configuring headgate placement and orientation. When they are talking about juvenile survival they are referring to whether salmon made it over or through the dam. Additionally, at Wanawish, there is a major pelican predation issue. Lastly, he shared that with the Bateman Island Causeway removal project, sediment findings will allow the project to proceed and that 40 Sockeye Salmon returned to Roza. Permitting is complete, and funding is secured, with work hopefully beginning this winter. He is hopeful that the returns will be significant after the Causeway is removed.

Yakima River Predation Projects

Presenters: Trenton De Boer, *Yakama Nation Fisheries*; Shelley Johnson, *USGS*

Trenton De Boer talked to the group about the high amount of avian predation on the Yakima River. Some of the predator species are native to the area and others such as the Caspian tern, northern pikeminnow, and double-crested cormorants are not native species. Each species has a different level of management. Today, they are focusing on the white pelican and the smallmouth bass.

At the Wanawish Dam, the water swirls and traps the fish which allows pelicans to hunt salmon easily. Smallmouth bass are not native to the Yakima River, but they have benefitted from the hydro system

changes. Meanwhile, the pelican population has grown and they have moved downstream. It is the third year of this project, and they are hoping to have more understanding of avian predation.

Shelley Johnson (online) shared more about these avian predation studies. From the study, they have learned that salmon smolts make up a substantial portion of pelican diets. The pelicans take pit-tagged salmon and drop them on land. Smallmouth bass are also a key food for pelicans, and they estimate the population based on their efficacy of removal actions.

USGS has completed one year of pelican diet analysis. The next step is quantifying predation of salmon and the impact of smallmouth bass removals on population size and smolt predation. Every week between April and May they removed smallmouth bass and predators that they found at their sites to analyze their diets. Food webs are complex, and measuring the impacts of management actions in real time allows for adaptation. Results from these studies directly inform best management approaches for the Yakama Nation to improve survival in the lower basin. They are also asking whether smallmouth bass attracts pelicans or if it is the salmon smolts.

Shelley took questions from the group following her presentation.

Q: *Is there a difference in the predation rate between the yearling summer chinook production and the sub-yearling summer chinook predation?*

A: Yakama Nation have not looked at these two yet. They are focusing on getting the facility built for this reason. The purpose of the yearling releases was part of the orca study. The yearling survived better as an out migrant but won't see this with the pelicans. The smolts are migrating during hard flows versus the yearlings which were during a low flow. After the smolts are eaten, the pelicans start going for the bass.

Final Comments

Workgroup Members

Urban Eberhart gave his thanks to Chad Stuart for being at the helm. He highlighted that the communications have been great. Urban appreciated all the extra work to get the pulse flows out.

Charlie de la Chapelle thanked the Yakama Nation for hosting the Workgroup again and announced to the group that the Yakama Nation was in attendance during Supreme Court Justice Gorsuch's award ceremony. The Yakima Valley Museum awarded the Justice for his work protecting Native American Treaty Rights. He also commented that the group must make more progress on storage as it jeopardizes the future progress that irrigation districts can make.

Mike Livingston gave another thank you to the Yakama Nation for sharing more about their culture and the significance of fish, first foods, and the land. He thanked the Bureau for their efforts with the Cle Elum fish passage and to everyone involved for their work to keep it going. The fish passage is a testament to the strength of this Workgroup.

Joe Blodgett gave thanks to Larry and Chad for understanding that this is a hard year and for their continued communication. He thanked the Army Corps of Engineers for their continuous work on the Bateman Island project. They are on track to have contracts ready this December.

Alex Conley shared that the Partner of the Year Award was presented to Ecology's Office of Columbia River, and he highlighted the diligence and creativity of the staff. There is another award ceremony on September 24, 2025.

Sean Gross recounted that this is the second drought since participating in YBIP. When the times are tough, the good news stands out more. Despite this being a more challenging drought, there are far more glimmers of hope. Progress on Cle Elum, the Roza stream rebuild, and Bateman Island projects are all accomplishments.

Brandon Parsons was able to see a tour of the Wapato Dam project and heard directly from irrigation districts. These communications made a huge difference and Brandon wanted to give thanks to the irrigation partners.

Phil Rigdon thanked the group for their progress on these projects and for having open conversations with each other.

Attendance (Online and In-Person)

Workgroup Members and Alternates:

Adam Fyall, Benton County
Alex Conley, Yakama Basin Fish and Wildlife Recovery Board
Bill Gale, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Brandon Parsons, Outreach Committee Co-Chair, American Rivers
Candy Carmack, Bureau of Reclamation
Chad Stuart, Bureau of Reclamation
Cindy Boen, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
Charlie de la Chapelle, Yakima Basin Storage Alliance
Craig Haskell, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Danielle Squeochs, Groundwater and Storage Subcommittee Chair, Yakama Nation
David Blodgett, Yakama Nation Fisheries
David Felman, Sunnyside Valley Irrigation District
David Haws, Yakima County
Jaclyn Hancock, Washington State Department of Agriculture
Jason McShane, Lower River Subgroup Co-Chair, Kennewick Irrigation District
Jim Milton, Yakima-Tieton Irrigation District
Joe Blodgett, Yakama Nation Fisheries
Larry Leach, Washington State Department of Natural Resources
Larry Mattson, Washington State Department of Ecology
Melissa Downes, Washington State Department of Ecology
Michael Porter, Lower River Subgroup Co-Chair, Yakama Nation Fisheries
Mike Livingston, Washington State Department of Fish & Wildlife
Mike Shane, City of Yakima
Phil Rigdon, Yakama Nation, Department of Natural Resources

Sage Park, Water Use Subcommittee Chair, Roza Irrigation District
Sean Gross, NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service
Seth Defoe, Kennewick Irrigation District
Shane Leonard, Kennewick Irrigation District
Theo Burgoon, Trout Unlimited
Travis Okelberry, Yakima-Tieton Irrigation District
Urban Eberhart, Outreach Committee Co-Chair, Kittitas Reclamation District

Other Attendees:

Alan Chapman, Whatcom Conservation District
Alison Pieper, HDR Engineering Inc.
Anna Marandi, HDR Engineering Inc.
Audrey Scott, Yakama Nation Fisheries
Bailey Draper, South Yakima Conservation District
Brandon Rogers, Yakama Nation Fisheries
Brian Schmidt, Bureau of Reclamation
Bruce Sully, Bureau of Reclamation
Cameron Mesplie, Yakama Nation Fisheries
Craig Broadhead, ESA
Chris Duke, Bureau of Reclamation
Chris Maykut, Friend of Bumping Lake
Chris Perra, Yakama Nation Fisheries
Chris Pitre, Coho Water Resources
Cynthia Carlstad, Northwest Hydraulic Consultants
David Fisher, Consultant, Bureau of Indian Affairs
David E. Ortman
David McKenzie, Kennewick Irrigation District
David Reaville, Washington State Department of Fish & Wildlife
Devin Stoker, Anchor QEA
Diani Taylor, Plauche & Carr
Graysen Squeochs, Yakama Nation Engineering
Heather Baxter, HDR Engineering, Inc.
Jean Mendoza, Friends of Toppenish Creek
Jeff Dermond, Washington State Department of Ecology
Jennifer Johnson, Washington State Department of Fish & Wildlife
Jennifer Stevens, Washington State Department of Ecology
Jeremy Takala, Yakama Nation Tribal Council
Joe Amend, Columbia Irrigation District
Joel Hubble, Consultant, Yakima Basin Joint Board
John Crotty, Western Legal PLLC
John Reeves, Save Lake Kachess
Justin Bezold, Trout Unlimited
Justin Harter, Naches-Selah Irrigation District
Justin Jacob, Wakish
Keith Wolf, Yakima County
Kelsey Green, Consultant, Yakima Basin Joint Board
Kevin Eslinger, Kittitas Reclamation District
Kevin Haydon, Washington State Department of Ecology

Kory Graafstra, Yakima County
Leif Krapas, Washington State Department of Ecology
Lily Sadataki, HDR Engineering, Inc.
Maddie Eckmann, Yakama Nation Fisheries
Mark Johnston, Yakama Nation Fisheries
Mary Dye, Washington State House of Representatives 9th District
Mel Babik, Kittitas Conservation Trust
Melinda Hernandez Burke, Bureau of Reclamation
Merritt Mitchell, Mid-Columbia Fisheries Enhancement Group
Michael Horner, Washington State Department of Ecology
Mitch Long, Kittitas Conservation Trust
Norman Semanko, Parsons Behle & Latimer
Rebecca Gutshall, Bureau of Reclamation
Rebecca Robinson, (affiliation unknown)
Rebecca Springer, City of Ellensburg
Roland Springer, Bureau of Reclamation
Sara Sohapp, Yakama Nation Fisheries
Sara Vickers, Kittitas Reclamation District
Scott Turner, Washington State Department of Ecology
Shawna Warehime, Washington State Department of Ecology
Shelley Johnson, U.S. Geological Survey
Steven Hockett, Washington State Department of Ecology
Stuart Crane, Yakama Nation Water Resources
Susan Woodward, American Rivers
Tim Poppleton, Washington State Department of Ecology
Tom Tebb, Retired
Trenton De Boer, Yakama Nation Fisheries
Trevor Hutton, Washington State Department of Fish & Wildlife
Shelly Willhoite, Office of Financial Management
Walt Larrick, Consultant, Yakima Basin Joint Board
William Meyer, Washington State Department of Fish & Wildlife
Zac Zacavish, Yakama Nation Fisheries

Where to Find Workgroup Information

Meeting materials, notes, presentations, and materials submitted during public comment for each Workgroup meeting will be posted on Reclamation's project website:

<http://www.usbr.gov/pn/programs/yrbwep/2011integratedplan/index.html>

A list of information sources, many available online, is also posted on the website.

If you need help finding an information source, contact those listed at the top of page 1 of these notes or Anna Marandi at HDR Engineering, Inc. anna.marandi@hdrinc.com.