

Yakima Basin Solutions: Now and For the Future

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Narrator: The Yakima Basin has to have more water. More water for irrigators, more water for cities and towns, and more water for endangered steelhead and salmon.

Jerry Haak: If I even have a 50, 60, 70 percent water supply it affects the size of my fruit. And at harvest time you don't want it. Wal-Mart doesn't want it. Safeway doesn't want it. And so what I'm finding out is if I don't have a full water supply then I can't meet the needs of the consumer with what they're demanding on fruit size. And so then I am losing money to the point where I can't afford to grow fruit in the valley.

Urban Eberhart: Yes, I've been impacted, we've been impacted, our neighbors have been impacted by the lack of water.

Narrator: Yakima Valley irrigators have been frustrated since the 1980s when junior water rights holders saw their water deliveries cut by two-thirds. This struggle has been intensified by drought conditions, increasing agricultural product demand, and competition for water by other water users.

This and other actions have been devastating to irrigators and to the Yakima Basin's economy. But there are a lot of other issues to consider. That's why landmark conservation laws like that which created the Yakima River Basin Water Enhancement Project or, YRBWEP, was enacted by congress back in 1979.

The intent was to find a balance between various water users through water conservation, fish passage, and habitat enhancement; and to pursue new water storage and expansion, groundwater storage, and water marketing as potential tools to manage growing water demands.

YRBWEP program is successful on many fronts – establishing a strong anadromous fisheries program; expanding water conservation and efficient water use; and building unique partnerships among water users, environmental groups, municipalities, government agencies and the Tribes.

Meanwhile, the Yakima Basin's decades-old chronic water shortage problem has generated a multitude of studies over the years.

Jerry Kelso: The studies take a long time. What happens is they drag on and on, people come and people go, and you end up studying things you've already studied.

Narrator: Now, finally, Basin stakeholders agree the time might be right for action.

Stakeholder: What if we had more consistency up and down the basin? How much water savings could you achieve with water conservation in the municipal sector if you had consistent programs?

Narrator: In 2009, the Washington Department of Ecology and the Bureau of Reclamation formed a working body of representatives from the Yakama Nation; federal, state, county, and city governments; environmental organizations; and irrigation districts. Known as the Yakima River Basin Water Enhancement Project Workgroup, they met approximately every two weeks for six months to hear each other out and to develop a mutually-acceptable draft plan for the basin.

Phil Rigdon: Over these decades, we've gone through adjudication, (inaudible) court cases, and we've gone through, and we've kind of drawn our lines in the sand and we've had our fights. I think we're coming together now. It's a really important time where we're in the room discussing the real changes that need to happen and make us all whole. That's a new conversation that we haven't necessarily had the opportunity to in the past.

Narrator: This active and progressive Workgroup has improved working relationships among each other and developed a comprehensive forward-thinking approach for addressing the Basin's current and future water needs.

This plan became known as the Integrated Water Resource Management Plan. In an age of soaring federal deficits, Workgroup members recognize funding is limited and that the Integrated Plan approach has the best chance to succeed. The Integrated Plan condenses a roomful of studies and in-depth reports to seven elements: Enhanced Water Conservation, New Water Storage or Expansion, Groundwater Storage, Water Marketing, Modifications to Existing Operations and Facilities, Fish Passage, and Fish Habitat Enhancement.

Opinions vary about individual projects but everyone agrees that all of the seven elements need to be included in the Final Integrated Water Resource Management Plan. The Washington Department of Ecology and Reclamation expect to have this final plan completed by early 2011.

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Narrator: The economic health of this region is directly linked to the Basin's water development and supply. As countless studies have pointed out, millions of dollars are spent by the recreating public on a healthy fishery.

YRBWEP Workgroup believes the Integrated Plan will be one of the largest ecological restorations ever conducted, restoring stream flows and improving fish habitat. It will also make the water more reliable for irrigators while stimulating the economy throughout central Washington.

Michael Garrity: I think both river recreation and quality of life and salmon and farming are all really important to the way of life in the Northwest and in central Washington here. And if we don't readjust the way we manage water in this part of the country, we're not going to be able to hold onto all those things. And if we do it right, we'll have our best chance to do that even with the challenges faced by climate change and population growth.

[Shouting]

Dave Fast: It's real important for the tribe, but it's also an icon for the Northwest. And salmon have always been here and there's a lot of people that don't fish for them, that just feel better knowing there are salmon in the rivers here.

Narrator: One hundred and twenty years ago, the Yakima River supported annual salmon runs of hundreds of thousands of fish. When development came, three species – the sockeye, summer Chinook, and Coho - disappeared from the river altogether.

Thanks to the Yakama Nation's reintroduction efforts, natural and hatchery populations of these salmon species have returned to much of the basin. The Yakama Nation sees the Integrated Plan as a key to sustainability.

Phil Rigdon: Balance is a key thing. I think more important for us is what does this do, it's going to deliver us into the future to where we have fish and we can have agriculture and we can work with a diverse group of stakeholders to try to address very challenging issues such as this. This plan and this process, we've put a lot of effort into putting it back in the direction where it's about this integrated package where instream and out-of-stream and priorities are directed toward the things that I think are the most challenging in this valley.

Narrator: In communities like Selah, Sunnyside, and Prosser, success is linked to reliable water supplies if they are to continue to grow and thrive.

Mike Leita: Clearly, agriculture and fish need water to survive. Not only do they need water to survive, but they need adequate water, dependable water on a long-term basis, and not be susceptible to the current droughts and the future droughts that we anticipate through ongoing climate changes.

Derek Sandison: There's also an economic demand for our environmental quality. Many, many people recreate who enjoy the natural resource amenities of central Washington, and keeping our streams healthy and restoring abundant runs of fish is very important to the tourism economy as well.

Narrator: By early 2011, the Washington Department of Ecology and various Workgroup members will deliver a Final Integrated Plan to Congress urging them to fund and implement a solution that will end decades of study and review.

The Integrated Plan will establish a framework for solving a 30-year dilemma that has caused economic uncertainty, inhibited growth, and limited recovery of Northwest fisheries. It is not a study, but an adaptable and integrated water resource management tool that will address Yakima Basin's water needs today, and into the future.

For more information on the process, the plan and cost estimates for various plan elements visit these websites at Bureau of Reclamation and the Washington Department of Ecology.

www.usbr.gov/pn/programs/yrbwep/2010workgroup

www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/cro/yakimabasin.html

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