



Oregon

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Water Resources Commission
FROM: Chris Kowitz, North Central Region Manager
SUBJECT: Agenda Item G, March 21, 2024
Water Resources Commission

Update on Integrated Water Resource Planning in the Walla Walla Basin

I. Introduction

This report provides an update on the integrated water resource planning initiatives the Oregon Water Resources Department (Department), the Washington State Department of Ecology (Ecology), and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) are currently working on in the Walla Walla Basin. This is an informational report.

II. Integrated Water Resources Strategy Recommended Action

- 1 A – Conduct Groundwater Investigations
- 1.B - Improve water resource data collection and monitoring
- 3.A – Determine flows needed to support instream needs
- 9. C – Partner with federal agencies, tribes, and neighboring states in long-term water resources management
- 11.A – Improve watershed health, resiliency, and capacity for natural storage

III. Background

Overlapping the states of Oregon and Washington, the Walla Walla Basin is a complex watershed struggling to meet water needs for rural and urban growth, and to maintain sufficient instream flows. Many of the water resources in the basin are over appropriated and are not available during certain times of the year, even for senior water right holders. Separate adjudications, water rights, and policies in each state have complicated these issues over time.

In 2004, a Civil Penalty Settlement between the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Hudson Bay District Improvement Company, Walla Walla River Irrigation District, and Gardena Farms Irrigation District #13 stipulated that certain minimum flows must be maintained in the Walla Walla River. The Settlement had significant impacts on water management in the basin and spurred new interest in water resource planning. Since that time, various groups have been

working in the basin to identify opportunities to increase flow in the Walla Walla River and provide stability for out of stream users in the basin.

IV. Discussion

In 2019, the Department, Ecology, and the CTUIR initiated development of a 30-year strategic plan for the Walla Walla Basin. As part of this initiative, a Strategic Plan Advisory Committee was formed and assisted with developing the plan's strategies and early action items.

The final plan, commonly referred to as the Walla Walla Water 2050 Water Management Plan (Plan), was released in June 2021. Beginning in early 2022, the Department, Ecology, and CTUIR shifted focus from developing the Plan to implementation (see <https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/publications/documents/2112011.pdf>.)

To help bring focus to this work, an overarching strategy was developed – the Walla Walla Basin Watershed Strategy (Strategy). Under this Strategy, implementation of the Plan – as well as the Bi-State Flow Study and Bureau of Reclamation WaterSmart Basin Study (discussed below) – has been guided by the Walla Walla Basin Advisory Committee. A number of projects have been scoped and funded under the Strategy and we expect the number of projects to increase in 2024.

In 2023, the Washington Legislature passed House Bill 1322. This law gives new authority to the Washington Department of Ecology. Specifically, it authorizes:

- Washington to spend funds on specific projects in Oregon, if those projects have a benefit to Washington water users or instream flow;
- Allows Washington to recognize water that is developed under the Plan (this includes water leased or transferred instream after the effective date of the legislation); and,
- Requires that Ecology submit a legislative report to the Washington legislature outlined bi-state water management options.

A similar bill, SB 1567, has passed the 2024 Oregon legislature to provide Oregon with similar reciprocal authorities. The bill is pending the Governor's signature.

In addition, three studies are underway in the basin. The Bureau of Reclamation, Ecology, CTUIR, and the Department have executed a Memorandum of Understanding to complete the Bureau of Reclamation WaterSmart Basin Study. Initial study work includes current and future water supply and demand forecasts, as well as the development of a Riverware model.

Work also continues to refine the water supply alternatives needed to meet the instream flow objectives of the Bi-State Flow Study, a multi-year analysis of instream flow needs of the Walla Walla River. The Department is providing technical oversight of the project and currently anticipate that final model runs will be completed by June. After the technical work is completed, a final alternative will be identified and phase 1 of the Bi-State Flow Study will be completed.

Finally, the Department continues to work on the undertaking a cooperative groundwater study with the Ecology and the US Geological Survey (USGS) to better understand the Walla Walla hydrologic system.

V. Conclusion

The Department will return to the Commission to provide periodic updates on the status of work underway in the Walla Walla Basin.

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