

Water Resources in the Little Spokane River Watershed (WRIA 55)

There are limited opportunities for new water uses in WRIA 55. In order to evaluate options for new uses, it is helpful to understand the overall water picture for the watershed.

The Little Spokane River watershed, Water Resources Inventory Area (WRIA) 55, includes about 675 square miles located within Spokane, Stevens and Pend Oreille counties. It is part of the Spokane-Coeur d'Alene watershed which encompasses about 6,600 square miles in parts of northeastern Washington and Idaho.

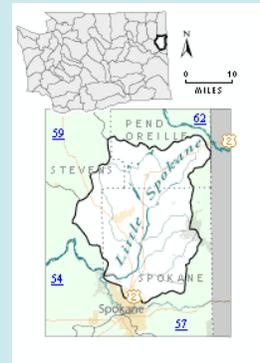
For management purposes, the Washington portion of the Spokane River watershed is divided into the Lower, Middle and Little Spokane River, and Hangman Creek watersheds.

The Selkirk Mountains form the eastern boundary of WRIA 55 along the Washington-Idaho state boundary. The Huckleberry Range forms the western boundary. Little Spokane River and Hangman Creek are the two major tributaries of the Spokane River. The major tributaries to the Little Spokane River are Deadman, Deer, Dragoon and Little Deep Creeks as well as the West Branch of the Little Spokane River. The largest lakes include Diamond, Eloika, Horseshoe and Sacheen, which are all located in the northern half of the watershed.

The largest aquifers in the watershed are in the valley of the Little Spokane River. Smaller and localized aquifers occur within tributary valleys and in upland areas. The Spokane Valley/Rathdrum Prairie aquifer --a vast, regional ground water system -- occupies a small portion of the southern part of the watershed.

Water availability

WRIA 55 streams and lakes are closed to new consumptive uses (uses that reduce the amount of water in the water source). All available water in the basin is legally "spoken for" while at the same time flow levels in the river are declining.



WRIA 55

Definitions

Adjudication: A county superior court process used to determine the extent (amount), validity, and priority of water rights and claims in an area. It results in a thorough accounting of water rights essential to the protection and management of water. An adjudication does not create new water rights, it only confirms existing rights.

Instream flow: Stream flow levels protected in a rule. These rules specify the amount of water needed in a particular place for a defined time, and typically follow seasonal variations.

TMDL: Total Maximum Daily Load. A water quality improvement plan. A TMDL is a common sense, science-based approach to cleaning up polluted water so that it meets water quality standards.

Watershed Planning: Under RCW 90.82, a framework for developing local solutions to water-related issues on a watershed basis.

WRIA: Water Resources Inventory Area; also known as a watershed or river basin. For environmental management purposes, Washington is divided into 62 WRIsAs.

In 1976, a water resources program for the Little Spokane River was adopted into rule (WAC 173-555). The rule set instream flows for the Little Spokane River, and closed its tributaries as well as all natural lakes to further uses. Instream flow rules establish a water right and priority date for the river to protect instream uses like fish habitat, water quality, recreation, and navigation. The rule only affects those who apply for new water rights *after* the rule was adopted. These “junior” water rights can be shut off when the flow in the river is below the required flows.

Instream flows on the Little Spokane River and its tributaries have not been met in 19 of the past 30 years. This is in part due to the rapid population growth in the watershed and the increasing number of single domestic (“permit-exempt”) wells being constructed. Spokane County leads the state in the number of small wells drilled each year.

Spokane River Basin adjudication

An important step in deciding whether water is available for new uses is to evaluate its legal availability. Ecology is currently researching and mapping water records in the Spokane River Basin. For the 2009-2011 biennium, Ecology received funding and legislative support to continue preparing for an adjudication in the Spokane watersheds. An adjudication is essential for effective water management. It also supports Washington’s interest in using interstate water as Idaho proceeds with a large-scale general adjudication of the Spokane River and tributaries in Idaho.

Water quality

The Little Spokane River, Deadman Creek and Dragoon Creek do not meet state water quality standards—including temperature, fecal coliform, dissolved oxygen, and pH. To address the water quality problems in the Washington portion of the watershed, Ecology and the Spokane County Conservation District are working together on a water quality clean-up plan, called a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL). Concurrent with this effort, Ecology is developing a TMDL to address low oxygen and high nutrients in the Spokane River and Lake Spokane (Long Lake).

The Little Spokane’s contribution of nutrients and sediment to the Spokane River is important to this process and will be considered during the development of a TMDL for the watershed.

Watershed planning

Planning under RCW 90.82 for WRIA 55 began in 1998, with Spokane County serving as the lead agency for the planning unit. The planning unit decided to develop a joint watershed plan with the Middle Spokane (WRIA 57) watershed. The WRIA 55/57 management plan was adopted by Spokane, Stevens, and Pend Oreille Counties in January 2006.

A detailed implementation plan -- the road map for putting the plan recommendations to work -- was completed in February 2008. The plan recommendations focus on instream flow needs, water conservation, reclamation and reuse, domestic exempt wells, water rights and claims, and strategies for ground water recharge. The watershed implementation team is currently working

on a water conservation education and outreach campaign to address summer low flows in the river. The region has the highest per person use of water in the state, primarily due to outdoor irrigation practices.

Shoreline Master Program

The City of Spokane and Spokane and Pend Oreille counties are all working on updates to their shoreline master programs. Stevens County adopted its shoreline master program in 1999. Under the state's Shoreline Management Act (SMA) of 1971, counties and cities are required to develop plans and administrative ordinances to regulate development and protect the shorelines of lakes, streams and their associated wetlands. Shoreland protection includes protection of natural resources such as fish and wildlife habitat, and also promotes public access and navigation. Protecting water quality and the natural character of shorelines and shorelands are also objectives of the SMA.

Water Rights in Washington State

Under state law, the waters of Washington collectively belong to the public and cannot be owned by any one individual or group. Instead, Ecology may grant individuals or groups the right to use the public waters of the state. Approval is given in the form of a water right permit.

You need a water right permit to use any surface water (water located above ground, such as lakes, rivers, streams and springs), or to use ground water (water located under the ground) at a rate of more than 5,000 gallons a day or to irrigate more than ½ acre of lawn and non-commercial garden. (For small ground water uses exempt from the permitting process, see RCW 90.44.050.)

Much of the water in Washington State has already been appropriated, which means it is spoken for and being used. This is making it more difficult to find water supplies for new growth and development, while still leaving enough water in our lakes and rivers for fish and other protected instream resources and values (such as wildlife, navigation, aesthetics and water quality).

Ecology is working closely with communities to help them effectively manage their water so we can meet current needs and help ensure future water availability for people, fish and the natural environment.

Water rights transfers

For water uses which exceed the ground water exemption under RCW 90.44.050, more and more people are looking to change or transfer existing water rights to meet their water needs. Generally Ecology will consider changes to the following elements of a water right:

- Place of use
- Point(s) of diversion or withdrawal
- Purpose of use (including season of use)

Both Spokane and Stevens Counties have established Water Conservancy Boards as an additional avenue to speed up the processing of water right change applications. The board can

consider change applications to valid water rights. Changes may not result in an enlargement of the water right or impact other water rights, including instream flows.

For more information

The Spokane River Forum is a recently created independent organization that serves as one place to go to get information about “all things” Spokane River and to create new opportunities for the public to be engaged in Spokane River issues. Visit the website at:

<http://www.spokaneriver.net>

Shoreline Management

- Michael Maher, Shorelands & Environmental Assistance Program at 509-329-3584; mmah461@ecy.wa.gov
- Ecology website: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/sea/SMA/index.html>

Spokane River Web site:

- http://www.ecy.wa.gov/geographic/spokane/spokane_river_basin.htm

Watershed Planning

- Sara Hunt, Shorelands & Environmental Assistance Program at 509-329-3579; sarh461@ecy.wa.gov
- Ecology website: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/watershed/index.html>

Water Quality

- Jon Jones, Water Quality Program at 509-329-3481; jojo461@ecy.wa.gov
- Ecology website: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/tmdl/index.html>

Water Rights

- General questions: Water Resources Program at 509-329-3400
- Technical questions: Gene Drury, Permit Writer at 509-329-3566; gdru461@ecy.wa.gov
- Ecology website: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/rights/water-right-home.html>

Other contacts:

Spokane County Division of Utilities,
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[http://www.spokanecounty.org/wqmp/
projects/ASP/Home.asp](http://www.spokanecounty.org/wqmp/projects/ASP/Home.asp)

Spokane County Water Conservancy Board
Doug Rider at 509-922-5127
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Stevens County Water Conservancy Board
Wes McCart at 509-258-4041
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Spokane Tribe of Indians
509-458-6500

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Department of Fish & Wildlife
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<http://wdfw.wa.gov/reg/region1.htm>

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