

## Cowlitz Watershed, WRIA 26

This focus sheet provides information on the availability of water for new uses in the Cowlitz Watershed. This information provides a starting point for potential water users in determining the likelihood of obtaining a new water right for a future project or proposal in this area.

The Cowlitz Watershed located in western Washington includes the Cowlitz River and numerous tributary creeks and streams, several of which originate in the Cascade Mountains and Willapa Hills. The annual precipitation in the Cowlitz Watershed ranges from 40 inches in the lower Cowlitz Valley to over 120 inches in the Cascade Mountains. Most of the precipitation falls during the winter months when water demands are the lowest. Only a fraction of this annual precipitation becomes available for human and economic uses.

During the summer, the snowpack is gone, there is little rain, and naturally low stream flows are dependent on groundwater inflow. At the same time, the demand for human uses, including irrigation, are at the yearly maximum. This means that groundwater and surface water are least available when water demands are the highest.

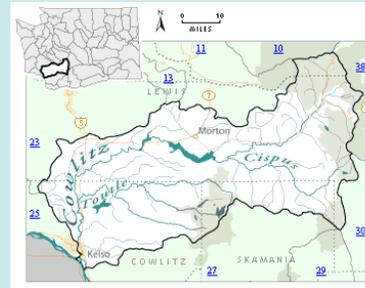
### Factors affecting water availability

This watershed is one of the most intensely farmed basins in western Washington, and much of the water in this watershed is already spoken for. Additionally, Tacoma Power has senior water rights to maintain reservoir levels in Riffe and Mayfield lakes. There is limited water available for new uses, especially given that river levels need to be maintained to ensure adequate water quality and fish migration. Increased demands from population growth, low summer and early fall streamflow levels, and impacts from climate change add to the challenge of finding new water supplies in the Cowlitz watershed.

Presently there is a need to develop a regulation to better address and manage current and future water supply in the Cowlitz River watershed. Any new regulation would address the following four key elements:

- Setting instream flows in the Cowlitz watershed.
- Closing flow critical subbasins to future withdrawals, where needed.
- Establishing reservations of water for future use.
- Specifying conditions of use for access to the water reserves.

### MORE INFORMATION



### Definitions

**Aquifer:** A rock formation that is capable of storing and transmitting groundwater.

**Instream flows:** Flow levels adopted into an administrative rule that create a water right for the stream to protect fish, wildlife, stock watering, recreational uses, and other instream uses and values. Typical instream flow rules now include broader water management strategies.

**Mitigation plan:** A plan intended to avoid impairment to existing water rights or provide offsets to surface water depletion.

**Surface water source limitation:** A recommendation from the Department of Fish and Wildlife that flows be protected to maintain fish populations. [See RCW 77.57.020](#)

Applicants seeking new water appropriations will likely need to provide mitigation to offset the impacts their use of water will have on surface water bodies.

The Cowlitz Watershed Plan recommends closures or restrictions of new water uses based on determinations of the Department of Fish and Wildlife known as Surface Water Source Limitations (SWSL), which limits most water sources in the watershed. Groundwater connected to surface sources is also subject to SWSL restrictions. Often these restrictions will require that new water uses stop during low flow periods. The following river and creek basins are identified by SWSL as being restricted or closed to new uses:

- Arkansas Creek - Closed
- Coal Creek- Restricted
- Cowlitz River - Restricted
- Frost Creek - Restricted
- Hall Creek – Closed
- Lacamas Creek - Restricted
- Leckler Creek - Closed
- Mill Creek – Restricted
- Minnie Creek - Restricted
- Olequa Creek – Closed (including tributaries)
- Rainy Creek - Restricted
- Salmon Creek - Restricted
- Siler Creek - Restricted
- Silver Creek – Restricted
- Snyder Creek - Closed
- Sulphur Creek - Closed
- Tilton River - Restricted

### **Water supply available for new uses**

Areas of potential water supply in the Cowlitz River watershed include municipal supplies and private water supply companies. In addition, the lower mainstem of the Cowlitz River and the tidally influenced areas of the Cowlitz, Coweeman, and Columbia rivers are proposed to be left open for new water rights.

The groundwater permit exemption allows certain users of small quantities of groundwater (most commonly, single residential well owners) to construct wells and develop their water supplies without obtaining a water right permit from Ecology. For more information about the groundwater permit exemption, refer to <https://fortress.wa.gov/ecy/publications/SummaryPages/1511016.html>.

If an applicant is not able to connect to an existing system or more water is needed than can be obtained from a permit-exempt well, then the water right application may be processed through the [Cost Reimbursement Program](#). For more information, also refer to “[Alternatives for Water Right Application Processing](#).”

## Pending water right applications in this watershed

Washington water law is based on the “prior appropriation” system, often called “first in time, first in right.” Applications for water from the same source must be processed in the order they are received.

Ecology asks anyone who needs a water right (new, change, or transfer) to submit the pre-application consultation form and meet with us to review your water supply needs and project proposal.

- Apply for a New Water Right  
<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/rights/newrights.html>
- Apply to Change or Transfer a Water Right or Claim  
[http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/rights/change\\_transfer\\_use.html](http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/rights/change_transfer_use.html)

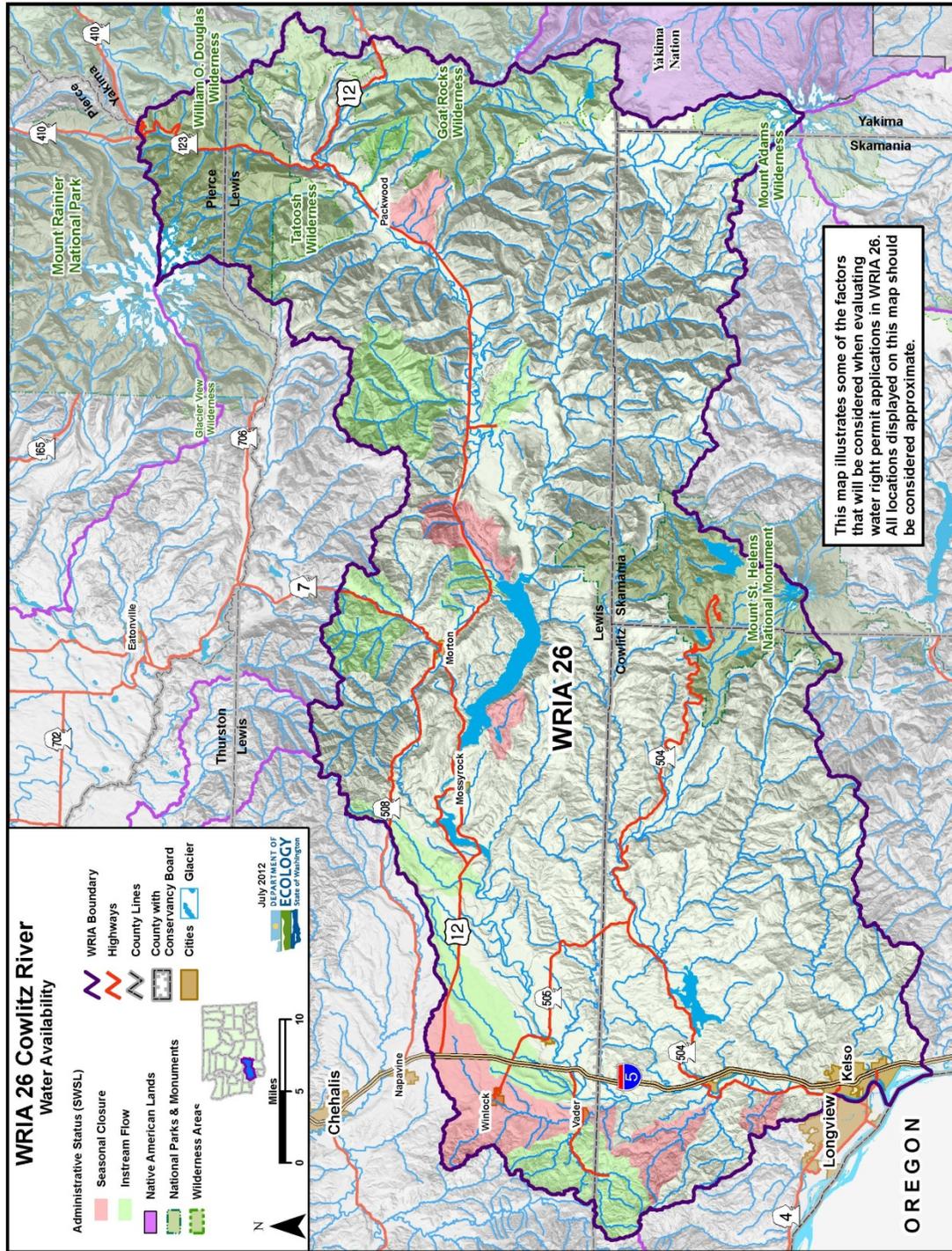
The map in this document shows some of the factors that will be considered when evaluating water right permit applications. Here are some information sources to assist you with your research:

- Locate and research water rights on land parcels anywhere in the state (Water Resource Explorer)  
<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/info/webmap.html>
- Pending Water Right Applications by County  
<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/rights/tracking-apps.html>
- Subscribe to a water right application RSS feed for a county or WRIA  
[http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/rights/wr\\_app\\_rss.html](http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/rights/wr_app_rss.html)
- WRIA map showing the total number of water right claims, certificates, permits and applications  
<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/rights/Images/pdf/waterright-wria-maps.pdf>
- Search and view well reports using a variety of search tools  
<https://fortress.wa.gov/ecy/waterresources/map/WCLSWebMap/default.aspx>

## For more information

Ecology Southwest Regional Office  
300 Desmond Drive  
Lacey, WA 98503  
360-407-6300

*If you need this document in a version for the visually impaired, call the Water Resources Program at 360-407-6872. Persons with hearing loss can call 711 for Washington Relay Service. Persons with a speech disability can call 877-833-6341*



This map illustrates some of the factors that will be considered when evaluating water right permit applications in WRIA 26. All locations displayed on this map should be considered approximate.