

Water Resources in the Esquatzel Coulee Watershed (WRIA 36)

There are limited opportunities for new water uses in WRIA 36. In order to evaluate options for new uses, it is helpful to understand the overall water picture for the watershed.

The Esquatzel Coulee Watershed, in eastern Washington, encompasses a large area east of the Columbia River and stretches across parts of Adams, Grant, and Franklin counties. The city of Connell is located in the center of the watershed. Significant water bodies include the Esquatzel Coulee, Wahluke Branch, Potholes and East Low Canals. The Saddle Mountain Range and Priest Rapids Dam are located in the western part of the watershed.

WRIA 36 faces some serious water issues. Water supply demands are increasing for agriculture, industrial uses and a growing population. At the same time, natural surface water flows and groundwater levels are declining in most areas.

Water management is particularly complicated due to the variety of regulatory agencies and jurisdictions involved; the complexity of state and federal laws; the high demand for water; and the lack of available water.

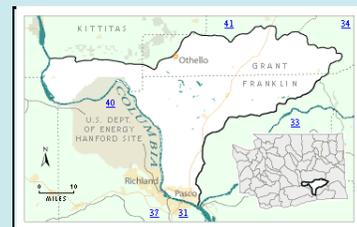
There are two unique groundwater management subareas covering portions of the watershed. And operating within this watershed is the massive federal Columbia Basin Project with its three irrigation districts.

Water availability

Opportunities for “new” water in the area are extremely limited. State water rights are no longer being issued for surface water. A combination of existing water rights, adjudicated water rights and federal claims has resulted in all surface water being legally appropriated, or “spoken for.”

Similarly, groundwater rights are no longer being issued in most of the watershed. Use of groundwater under the permit-exemption (RCW 90.44.050) is still available in appropriate cases, but there is growing concern over the cumulative impacts of the large number of household wells in the area.

Many people are looking to water right transfers to meet new water needs. Refer to “Water Rights in Washington State” on page three.



WRIA 36

Definitions

Artificially Stored Ground Water (ASGW): Water stored under ground as a result of imported waters from the Columbia Basin Project.

Columbia Basin Project

(CBP): The irrigation network in central Washington made possible by the Grand Coulee Dam. Managed by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

U.S. Bureau of Reclamation

(BOR): Part of the federal Dept. of the Interior, BOR manages, develops and protects water, including providing water for irrigation and power generation.

Watershed Planning:

A process authorized and funded by the Legislature starting in 1998 under RCW 90.82. The process creates 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.

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Water management: the Columbia Basin Project (CBP) and groundwater subareas

During the past fifty years, irrigation has transformed the central Columbia Basin into an area with some of the most productive agricultural lands in the country. Most of the irrigation water comes from imported surface water through a network of canals and ditches built for the Columbia Basin Project (CBP). Some of this introduced irrigation water has seeped into the ground where it has mixed with natural groundwater. As a result, the groundwater system throughout much of the basin has a large component of “artificially stored groundwater” (ASGW) that was not present before the CBP began. This presents special issues for making groundwater available for new uses, since the exact amounts of natural versus stored water are not known.

The CBP is a federally authorized project with multiple purposes: irrigation, power production, flood control, municipal water supply, recreation, and fish and wildlife benefits. The CBP canal system provides water for most of the agricultural irrigation in the region. Some of this water is distributed or managed through local irrigation districts and some by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (BOR). If there is water available, contracts for water use can be made with the irrigation districts (for agricultural irrigation) or the BOR (for non-agricultural irrigation, municipal or industrial uses).

The CBP’s authority includes WRIA 36’s two distinct *groundwater management subareas* : the “508-14” and Odessa. “Groundwater management subarea” is a legal designation, established for specific geographical areas to protect groundwater quality, assure groundwater quantity and effectively manage water resources to meet future needs. The “508-14” and Odessa subareas each have their own regulatory framework, and unique water and land management practices.

“508-14” CBP-Groundwater Management Subarea: Named for the rule that defined its boundaries (WAC 508-14) and commonly known as the “CB” for Columbia Basin, this Subarea occupies parts of Franklin, Grant and Adams Counties. The rule established policies for granting new groundwater permits for use of commingled public or “naturally occurring” and the “artificially stored” groundwater. The rule and policies are used by Ecology in determining whether to issue permits with the condition that if it was later determined that sufficient quantities of public waters are not available, Ecology may withdraw or modify the permits as necessary.

Ecology, in cooperation with the BOR, is evaluating the quantity of water available for allocation of both “naturally occurring” and “artificially stored” groundwaters in the Franklin County portion of the 508-14 Subarea. It is possible that current water use permits for the use of naturally occurring water may be modified to use only artificially stored water and require a contract agreement with BOR. Such agreements require that an annual fee is paid to BOR for the use of the water, and that users comply with certain provisions of federal law.

Odessa Groundwater Management Subarea: Located in the northern portion of WRIA 36, the Odessa Subarea is characterized by significant declines in groundwater levels. It has been determined that groundwater is not available for new uses.

In 2006, the Odessa Subarea Conservation Relinquishment Exception was passed under Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 6151 in an effort to conserve water in the Subarea and to encourage more efficient use of water. This statutory amendment allows Odessa aquifer groundwater users to not use the full quantities of water authorized by their water rights without being subject to relinquishment of the rights. (Relinquishment is the loss of all or part of a water right after five or more years of non-use.)

In October 2010 the Columbia Basin Development League released a five-year study that looked at expanding the area that can use surface water instead of groundwater currently being pumped from the aquifer in the CBP. The study looked at the infrastructure needed to deliver water to the Odessa Subarea, but did not evaluate options for delivering additional water to the Subarea.

Water quality

In 1999, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was developed to coordinate water management in this area. This MOU includes the following partners: the East, Quincy, and South Columbia Basin Irrigation Districts, the BOR, the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency and Ecology. The MOU guides actions for an interagency approach to water quality issues.

In response to scientific data indicating nitrate concentrations above what is considered naturally-occurring levels for the area, the Columbia Basin Ground Water Management Area (GWMA) was formed. It is a grassroots, pro-active, voluntary, local planning effort to reduce nitrate in groundwater. It was created by locally-elected leaders and citizens of Adams, Franklin, Lincoln and Grant Counties in 1997. The four-county area is formally designated as a GWMA by Ecology and is a state-sponsored method for local citizens and government to work together in the development of a GWMA Plan for groundwater protection.

Watershed planning

Planning under RCW 90.82 is not required by law and was not pursued in WRIA 36.

Shoreline master programs

Adams County and Grant County have approved Shoreline Master Programs (SMPs). Any use or development within shoreline jurisdiction must be in compliance with the provisions of these SMPs, the Shoreline Management Act, and the implementing Guidelines. Adams County must complete a comprehensive update to their SMPs by December 2014, and Grant County by December 2013.

Floodplain management

Esquatzel Coulee is a mapped floodplain under the National Flood Insurance Program of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Any development within the mapped area requires the local jurisdiction to accept an application and issue a Floodplain Development Permit.

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 a municipality, corporation, individual or group the right to use water. Approval is given in the form of a water right permit issued by Ecology.

You must have a water right to use any surface water (water located above ground, such as lakes, rivers, streams and springs), *or* any groundwater (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 garden (see RCW 90.44.050).

Much of the water in Washington State has already been appropriated, which means it is legally 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 Washington 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 right transfers

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).

Adams, Franklin and Grant Counties have established Water Conservancy Boards as additional avenues for processing water-right transfer applications.

For more information

General questions can be directed to Ecology at 509-329-3400 or to the following:

Water rights

- Kevin Brown, Permit Writer at 509-329-3422; kevin.brown@ecy.wa.gov or
Lynn Maser, Watermaster at 509-662-0514; lynn.maser@ecy.wa.gov (Wenatchee office)
- Ecology website: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/rights/water-right-home.html>

Shoreline management

- Michael Maher, Shorelands & Environmental Assistance Program at 509-329-3584;
michael.maher@ecy.wa.gov
- Ecology website: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/sea/shorelines/index.html>
- Contact your local government for SMA regulations in your area

Water quality

- Jon Jones, TMDL Lead, at 509-329-3481; jon.jones@ecy.wa.gov
- Marcia Sands, Hydrogeologist, Columbia Basin GWMA, at 509-329-3518; marcia.sands@ecy.wa.gov
- Ecology Water Quality website: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/wqhome.html>

Watershed planning

- Ecology website: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/watershed/index.html>

Other contacts

Adams County Water Conservancy Board
Joyce McNeil at 509-659-1553
E-mail: adamcd@ritzcom.net

Columbia Basin Groundwater Management
Area website: <http://www.cbgwma.org/>

Department of Fish & Wildlife, Eastern WA
509-892-1001
<http://wdfw.wa.gov/reg/region1.htm>

East Columbia Basin Irrigation District
55 N 8th Street, Othello, WA 99344
509-488-9671

Franklin County Water Conservancy Board
John Griffin at 509-585-4534
E-mail: johng@ci.kennewick.wa.us
Mark Nielson at 509-545-8546x.3

Grant County Water Conservancy Board
Robert Rolfness at 509-750-7589
E-mail: rolfb@accima.com

South Columbia Basin Irrigation District
1135 E Hills Burrow, Ste. A, Pasco, WA 99301
509-547-1735

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