

Middle Snake Watershed, WRIA 35

This focus sheet provides information on the availability of water for new uses in the Middle Snake 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 Middle Snake Watershed located in southeastern Washington includes a portion of the Snake River and its numerous tributary creeks and streams, lying between its confluence with the Palouse River and the Oregon Stateline. The Snake River originates in the mountains of Idaho and Wyoming. The annual precipitation in the Middle Snake Watershed ranges from 10 inches per year near its confluence with Palouse River, to 40 inches in the higher elevations of the Blue Mountains. Only a fraction of this precipitation becomes groundwater available for human and economic uses. Most of the precipitation arrives during the winter months, when water demands are the lowest. During the summer, the snowpack is gone, there is little rain, and naturally, low stream flows are dependent on groundwater inflow. This means that groundwater and surface water are least available when water demands are the highest.

Much of the water in the Middle Snake Watershed has already been spoken for. Increased demands from population growth, declining groundwater levels, and impacts from climate change are adding to the challenge of finding new water supplies in WRIA 35, especially during the summer months.

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Factors affecting water availability

Adjudications

Alpowia Creek, Deadman Creek, Meadow Gulch Creek and Wawawai Creek are adjudications that have been completed within WRIA 35. In general, most of the water in these adjudicated basins has been allocated and new appropriations are not available.

MORE INFORMATION



Definitions

Adjudication: A legal process conducted through a superior court to determine the extent and validity of existing water rights.

Consumptive use: A use of water that diminishes the amount of water in the water source.

Mitigation plan: A scientifically-sound plan to offset the impacts of a proposed water use.

Surface water source limitations (SWSLs): A determination by State Fish and Wildlife that water is not available based on needs for fish. See RCW 77.55.050.

WRIA: Water Resources Inventory Area; also known as a watershed or river basin. For environmental administration and planning purposes, Washington is divided up into 62 major watersheds, or WRIsAs. WRIA's were defined by [Chapter 173-500 WAC](#) in 1976.

The WRIA 35 Watershed Planning Group completed stream flow recommendations and included them in their watershed plan for the Tucannon River and Asotin Creek. The group is currently gathering flow and habitat data on several other streams in the watershed. They expect Ecology and the Department of Fish and Wildlife to collaborate in completing a final watershed-wide stream management recommendation for rule-making soon.

Groundwater

In general, availability and yield of groundwater from bedrock in this WRIA is very limited by climate and geology. In addition, many areas are in decline, meaning little if any water is available for new consumptive appropriations.

Surface water

The Middle Snake watershed has administrative restrictions known as Surface Water Source Limitations (SWSLs), which limit most water sources in the watershed. Groundwater connected to the surface sources are also subject to SWSL restrictions. Often these restrictions will require that new water uses stop during low flow periods. In addition, Alpowa Creek, is “closed” by SWSL, meaning the water body is closed to new uses. These restrictions along with [WAC 173-564](#) indicate that most water has been appropriated within the watershed.

Water supply available for new uses

The Middle Snake watershed is not closed to new water uses (appropriations). However, the majority of water has been appropriated and new uses are subject to the above listed restrictions.

The groundwater permit exemption allows certain users of small quantities of ground water (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 www.ecy.wa.gov/pubs/fwr92104.pdf.

The permit exemption may not be available to prospective water users in certain areas that have been closed to further appropriation because there is limited or no water available. Check with Ecology staff at the regional office for more information.

The Office of Columbia River (OCR) is aggressively pursuing water supply development opportunities throughout the Columbia Basin. You can find additional information at the OCR Web site at: www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/cwp/crwmp.html.

Additional options for finding a water supply include:

- Connecting to an established water supplier. This is the fastest and simplest option.
- Proposing mitigation to offset the impacts to surface water and groundwater.
- Processing an application through the Cost Reimbursement Program.
www.ecy.wa.gov/pubs/0511016.pdf.

For more information on these and other options, 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

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
- 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

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