

Methow Watershed, WRIA 48

This focus sheet provides information on the availability of water for new uses in the Methow Watershed. This information provides a starting point for potential water users in determining the best strategies for securing water for a future project or proposal in this area.

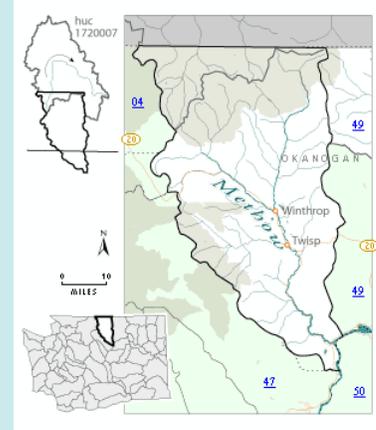
Many areas of central Washington are arid, receiving less than 20 inches of rain annually. Most of this precipitation arrives during the winter months when water demands are the lowest. During the summer, the snowpack is gone, there is little rain, and naturally low stream flows are dependent on groundwater inflow. At the same time the demand for water 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.

Much of the water in the Methow Watershed has already been spoken for. Increased demands from population growth, endangered fish species and impacts from climate change are adding to the challenge of managing water in Water Resource Inventory Area 48.

Factors affecting water availability

In 2004, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation filed notice with the Department of Ecology that the United States intends to make examinations and surveys for the utilization of the unappropriated waters of the Columbia River and its tributaries above Priest Rapids Dam, pursuant to Section 90.40.030 of the Revised Code of Washington. The withdrawal of these waters from future appropriations is currently in effect until December 23, 2014, with an exemption for a limited quantity of water.

Ecology cannot process any applications filed after December 28, 2004 for new rights to surface water or connected groundwater unless the applicant first obtains a release from the Bureau of Reclamation or until the withdrawal has expired. The withdrawal may be extended, and Ecology expects BOR to request an extension before the withdrawal expires.



Definitions

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

Instream flows are flow levels adopted into rule that create a water right for the stream to protect fish, wildlife, stock watering, recreational uses, and other instream uses and values.

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. WRIsAs were defined by Chapter 173-500 WAC in 1976.

Subbasins are smaller drainage basins that together make up a WRIA. Subbasins are generally named for the principle creek or other surface water that runoff flows to.

Stream flows are a significant limiting factor in this basin. A water resource management program for the basin, [Chapter 173-548 WAC](#), was developed in 1976, and amended in 1991.

The water management rule:

- Sets instream flows (<http://apps.leg.wa.gov/WAC/default.aspx?cite=173-548-020>, referred to as “base flows”) throughout the basin.
- Reserves a quantity of water for future uses.
- Closes numerous streams and lakes in the watershed to new uses.
- Restricts use under the permit exemption established in [RCW 90.44.050](#) for smaller groundwater withdrawals.
- States that groundwater hydraulically connected to surface waters is subject to the same conditions as the affected surface waters.

Applications for surface water withdrawals from the mainstem Columbia River are subject to the Instream Resource Protection Program for the Columbia River, as are any proposed groundwater withdrawals determined to have a significant and direct impact on the Columbia River. (See <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/WAC/default.aspx?cite=173-563>)

Numerous adjudications have taken place in the basin. Prior adjudications are an indication that most, if not all, of the available water has already been allocated. Adjudicated subbasins include:

- Bear Creek and Davis Lake
- Beaver Creek
- Black Canyon Creek
- Gold Creek
- Libby Creek
- McFarland Creek
- Wolf Creek.

Water supply available for new uses

Surface water and groundwater availability is currently very limited throughout the basin, especially in light of the Bureau of Reclamation’s withdrawal. [WAC 173-548](#) identifies minimum flow levels for the mainstem Methow and its largest tributary streams, and established closures for smaller tributary streams. Water demand conflicts under existing rights are acute in the closed tributary streams. In those closed basins, specific requirements restrict even proposed permit-exempt groundwater uses. [WAC 173-548-030](#) reserved 2 cfs in 7 reaches of the Methow River and its largest tributaries for new single domestic or stock watering uses .

The Office of Columbia River (OCR) is aggressively pursuing water supply development opportunities throughout the Columbia Basin. You may find further information on these efforts on the OCR Web Page: www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/cwp/crwmp.html. Some projects are being studied in WRIA 48 that could make water available in the future. Additionally, OCR has developed supplies on the Columbia River mainstem that may satisfy surface water and adjacent groundwater applications in WRIA 48 (e.g. Lake Roosevelt Incremental Storage Release Project and Sullivan Lake Water Supply Project).

The 1980 Columbia River Rule, [WAC 173-563-020](#), requires a consultation process for any new surface water application (or groundwater application that would have significant and direct impacts on the Columbia River). The purpose of the consultation process is to inform Ecology whether “the use of such waters will be, if deemed necessary, subjected to instream flow protection or mitigation conditions determined on a case-by-case basis through the evaluation conducted with the agencies and tribes.” The OCR projects described above are using this consultation process to develop mitigation projects that allow Ecology to issue new water right permits. New applications in the consultation process not covered by OCR mitigation would likely require independent mitigation to address fishery impacts.

Additional options for finding a water supply include:

- Connecting to an established water supplier. This is the fastest and simplest option.
- Processing a change application on an existing pre-1977 water right through the Okanogan County Water Conservancy Board.
- Processing your application through the Cost Reimbursement Program. Refer to www.ecy.wa.gov/pubs/0511016.pdf. The applicant will likely need to develop a mitigation strategy to offset any impacts their water use would have on existing water rights and adopted instream flow water rights.

For more information on these and other options, refer to “Alternatives for Water Right Application Processing” www.ecy.wa.gov/pubs/1111067.pdf.

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. (There are certain exceptions, see “Additional options for processing water right applications” below.)

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 additional 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>

Further Information

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Persons with hearing loss can call 711 for Washington Relay Service. Persons with a speech disability can call 877-833-6341*

