

Middle Spokane Watershed, WRIA 57

This focus sheet provides information on the availability of water for new uses in the Middle Spokane 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.

April 2014 update: The Dept. of Ecology is developing an instream flow rule to protect the Spokane River. The rule would apply to the main stem of the Spokane River from the Idaho border to Lake Roosevelt. For more information about the proposed rule and the rule-making process, look [here](#).

The Middle Spokane Watershed (also referred to as Water Resources Inventory Area, WRIA, 57) is located in eastern Washington. It includes a portion of the Spokane River and its numerous tributary creeks and streams, lying between the City of Spokane and the Idaho Stateline. The Spokane River and some of its tributaries originate in the mountains of Idaho. In addition, several tributaries begin in Washington, flow into Idaho and eventually rejoin the Middle Spokane watershed.

The annual precipitation in the Middle Spokane Watershed ranges from 17 inches per year in the area around the City of Spokane to 35 inches in the higher mountainous area. Only a fraction of this precipitation becomes 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. This means that groundwater and surface water are least available when water demands are the highest.

Much of the water in the Middle Spokane Watershed has already been spoken for (appropriated). 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 57, especially during the summer months.



Definitions

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

Appropriation (of water): The process of legally acquiring the right to specific amounts of the public water resource for beneficial uses (as opposed to **unappropriated**, water that has not been legally acquired).

Consumptive use: A use of water that diminishes the amount or quality of water in the water source (as opposed to **nonconsumptive**, a use that does not reduce the water source).

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 scientifically-sound plan intended to avoid impairment to existing water rights or capturing water from a closed source.

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

Adjudication

For the 2009-2011 biennium, Ecology received funding and legislative support research and map water rights in the Spokane watersheds.

Groundwater

In general, availability of groundwater from bedrock in this watershed is very limited by climate and geology.

The Spokane Valley Rathdrum Prairie Aquifer (SVRP) and the Spokane River are intimately linked. Water withdrawals from the aquifer directly affect flows in the river. The U.S. Geological Survey and the states of Washington and Idaho completed a bi-state study of the SVRP aquifer in 2007. Water availability is generally considered limited in the SVRP, due to impacts on the Spokane River. State and local governments are evaluating options to improve management of the water resources shared between Washington and Idaho.

Surface water

The Middle Spokane Watershed has administrative restrictions known as Surface Water Source Limitations (SWSL), which limit most water sources in the watershed. Groundwater connected to surface sources is also subject to SWSL restrictions. Often these restrictions require that new water uses stop during low flow periods. This indicates that most water has been appropriated within the watershed. In addition, Blanchard Creek and Thompson Creek are “closed” by SWSL, meaning the water body is closed to new uses.

The [WRIA 55/57 Watershed Planning Unit](#) developed a joint watershed plan for the Middle Spokane (WRIA 57) and Little Spokane River (WRIA 55) watersheds. The WRIA 55/57 and WRIA 54 (Lower Spokane) planning units worked together (instream flow work group) to conduct technical studies and revise instream flow recommendations for the Middle and Lower Spokane River to address flow needs for fish habitat, water quantity, recreation, and navigation. Although the group did reach consensus on flows at the “Barker” gage, it did not reach consensus on flows at the downtown Spokane gage. Additional fish studies completed by Avista Corp. have provided Ecology with adequate data to finalize its proposed instream flow numbers and develop a water resources management rule for the Spokane River and Spokane Valley Rathdrum Prairie Aquifer.

Water supply available for new uses

The Middle Spokane Watershed is not closed to new water uses (appropriations). However, this watershed is considered over-appropriated, that is, all available water is legally “spoken for”. And flows on the Spokane River are declining. Therefore, any new rights would be seasonal (interruptible), or the impacts of the water use would need to be fully offset (through mitigation).

In some situations, surface water applications for single in-house domestic use or stock watering may be approved if no alternate source of water supply is available and the proposed use will not impair existing water rights.

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.

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. However, water rights developed through the permit exemption are not exempt from the water right seniority system and could be regulated during future drought periods. For more information about the groundwater permit exemption, refer to Ecology publication #F-WR-92-104; www.ecy.wa.gov/pubs/fwr92104.pdf.

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 with the Spokane County Water Conservancy Board.
- Processing an application through the Cost Reimbursement Program. Refer to Ecology publication #05-11-016; www.ecy.wa.gov/pubs/0511016.pdf. You will likely need to develop a mitigation strategy to offset any impacts the water use will have on surface waters.

For more information on these and other options, refer to “Alternatives for Water Right Application Processing”, Ecology publication #11-11-067; 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.

Ecology asks anyone who needs a water right (new, change, or transfer) to submit a 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 on the last page of this document shows some of the factors that will be considered when evaluating water right permit applications. Here are 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

<http://apps.ecy.wa.gov/welllog/>

For more information

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