



Columbia River Policy Advisory Group

April 4, 2024

Hybrid Meeting - Hal Holmes Community Center, Ellensburg and online via Zoom

Meeting Summary

Slides and recording available at [CRPAG Website](#)

Welcome and Introductions

Tom Tebb (WA Ecology) opened the meeting and introduced the new facilitation team from Ross Strategic. The new facilitation team includes Rob Willis and Tess Wendel along with support from Bob Montgomery (Anchor QEA).

- Rob Willis is a principal at Ross Strategic. Rob has been at Ross Strategic for 23 years. His primary work is facilitating meetings for local, state and government organizations. Currently his is working with WA Ecology on Wind and Solar PEIS work, EPA Region 10 prescribed fire and public health, EPA Region 9 on a 3-way negotiation on pesticide enforcement with county agricultural commissioners, and supporting EPA's outreach and engagement for PFAS
- Tess Wendel is a Washington local and previously worked with WA Ecology previously on the Eight-mile Lake Dam restoration project. She is experienced in providing tech support for in-person and online participants.
- Bob Montgomery is a water resource engineer with Anchor QEA providing technical support around water issues in the Pacific Northwest. Bob has been involved in Columbia basin work and worked for many irrigation districts. Bob has been working on issues related to Columbia Policy Advisory group since its inception. Also been working on Yakima integrated plan and Icicle Strategy.

Capital Budget Development

Tom Tebb provided an update on Ecology's Capital Budget development. Ecology needs to put in a budget placeholder by April 26 and is looking closely at 2023-2024 session to fund the growing portfolio of work. Melissa Downes noted that Ecology hopes to have more project detail to share at the July CRPAG meeting as Ecology goes through budget building process. The process will culminate with a final budget submitted by Ecology to the WA Office of Financial Management.

Legislative Updates

Noah Wentzel (WA Ecology) provided the CRPAG with a legislative update. His slide presentation is available on the WA Ecology CRPAG website ([View slides](#)) and on TVW ([Presentation on TVW](#) begins at 14:00 min mark). Noah described two passed bills, HB 1752 and SSB 5828. Mike Schisow provided some additional info about HB 1752 that enables the Bureau of Reclamation to apply for permits to change acreage within the federal Columbia Basin Project. Noah described inactive bills HB 2074, HB 2105, 2187, SSB 5517, and SSB 6062. Noah provided updates on several notable provisos including

ones on IT geospatial resources, ground water modelling, and the Water Use Efficiency Program evaluation.

Discussion

Tom Tebb noted an additional \$5.5 million proviso (2024 supplemental capital budget) which will invest in a groundwater replacement program for EL 22.1 pump station as part of the Odessa Groundwater Replacement Project.

[Update on Integrated Water Resource Planning in the Walla Walla Basin](#)

Anton Chinono, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) provided the CRPAG an update on the Integrated Water Resources Planning in the Walla Walla basin. His slides are available on the WA Ecology CRPAG website ([view slides](#)) and his presentation can be seen on TVW (35:00 min mark on [TVW](#)).

Anton presented an overview of the history of the Walla Walla Basin, details on the Walla Walla Water 2050 Strategic Plan, and an overview of the Walla Walla Advisory Committee and the tri-sovereign commitments and leadership structure. Anton emphasized how the consensus-based decision-making structure led to new outcomes and the recent passage of Oregon legislation SB 1567.

[Irrigation Sector Economic Impacts--Lower Snake River: Benchmark Review for Dam Breaching and Mitigation Costs](#)

Darryll Olsen (CSRIA) and Mark Nielson (Franklin County) provided the CRPAG a briefing on the benchmark review study looking at dam breaching and mitigation costs. Their slides are available on the WA Ecology CRPAG website ([view slides](#)) and his presentation can be seen on TVW (56:00 min mark on [TVW](#)).

Darryll described that the benchmark report answers the question “can you provide replacement services and at what cost?” The benchmark study found that you could provide replacement services but at a cost of roughly 750 million dollars. Darryll described that irrigation is further ahead than other industries in determining the impacts of lower Snake River dam breaching and mitigation costs. Darryll noted that all information and costs quickly become outdated due to changing market circumstances. Mark provided some additional context around 1:09:00 min related to impacted irrigation acre mapping.

Discussion

- Tom Tebb thanked Darryll for all the work that’s been done putting together these reports.
- A CRPAG member asked about whether the idea would be to add a single diversion pipeline. Darryll affirmed that yes that is roughly the plan and noted that they would seek to minimize down time but ultimately there will be 1-2 years when systems will not be in full production.
- Another CRPAG member asked about Darryll’s sense of public interest and opinion at this time about breaching the dams. Darryll noted that there is increasing support for dam breaching. At this time CSRIA has reached a conclusion that the system is going to change, it’s just a matter of what kind of changes and what kind of timeline these changes will occur.



Washington Association of Counties - Columbia River Caucus Update

Wes McCart (Stevens County) provided an update from the March 20th Columbia River Caucus meeting ([TVW](#) at 1:28:00 min mark). The Caucus received a similar legislative update to what was discussed earlier in this meeting with a couple additions. The legislature voted to increase Water Bank pilot program funding from \$2 million to \$4 million and its expanded scope which was happily received by most of the counties. Wes shared that \$74,000 from WA Governor's office has been allocated to continue work on net ecological gain discussions and buffers on salmon waterways. Three county commissioners (including Wes) have been very engaged in these discussions along with Paul Jewell from Washington State Associations of Counties.

The Caucus received an update on the water supply inventory from Ecology staff and Tom Tebb also provided a funding and legislative update from the Office of Columbia River similar to what was shared earlier in today's meeting. The Caucus also discussed the rulemaking process with the Bureau of Reclamation going on in the Pasco Basin area, related to Bureau of Reclamation and Ecology's Pasco Basin Groundwater Project.

The caucus spent time discussing the possible superfund fund designation of the upper Columbia River and Lake Roosevelt area. US EPA has a potential listing on the [National Priorities List](#) of the region between the Grand Coulee up to the Canadian border all along the Columbia River and associated lands. The counties discussed concerns about the potential Superfund listing.

The Caucus also received an update on the settlement agreement that Dr. Olsen and Mark Neilson referenced earlier. The focus was more on the agreement rather than the benchmark studies being performed by CSRIA related to the Lower Snake River dam breaching. The Caucus did talk about the Columbia River treaty, mostly in reference to whether there were any updates, and the group was not aware of any updates.

Wes invited CRPAG to join him for a tour in June to get some eyes on the ground. Tom thanked Wes for the update and noted how valuable it is to have updates from those working at the local level. No questions from the room or on Zoom.

Office of Columbia River Forecast Update (Scott Turner)

Scott Turner gave the OCR Forecast update including information about the drought insurance program. His slides are available on the WA Ecology CRPAG website ([view slides](#)) and his presentation can be seen on TVW (1:36 :00 min mark on [TVW](#)). Scott is on the operations team which manages metering, water banking and permitting. He explained the three levels for the water forecast on the Columbia River mainstem and that if the forecast shows 60-million-acre feet or less by March 1 at the Dalles Dam that triggers action for additional water releases and drought management. The March 1 forecast showed 77-million-acre feet so no actions have yet been triggered drought management but OCR is doing work to make sure that systems are ready to go if it reaches that threshold. Scott provided an overview of the Columbia River Drought Insurance Program which has two main sources of water for the program 1) Lake Roosevelt Incremental Storage and Release Program and 2) Other Water Banking Solutions.



Scott shared that OCR is working with several large agricultural entities to establish water banks for when March 1 forecast drops below 60-million-acre feet at the Dalles Dam. Ideally these water banks can be used to help those who have interruptible water rights on the Columbia River mainstem. Scott noted that these farms are using water saving techniques like shade cloth deployment.

Discussion

A CRPAG member asked where Ecology anticipate getting further farm efficiencies? Ecology responded saying a variety of methods being looked at since each entity is a little different. Some of the farms are moving towards advanced pivots. Some farms are still developing new permits, so Ecology is working with them to use as minimal amount of water as possible. Ecology staff acknowledged that it will be small amounts of water, but it is real water.

Ecology noted they are investing OCR's time to go through the water rights and work with entities to develop change applications to determine if there is wet water to be banked. Doing this tedious work means that we may get the option to lease water from the water right holder if its available. Doing this permit consolidation is helpful for Ecology but also can be helpful to larger farms/entities that have a hodgepodge of water rights and make it easier for them to manage their water right portfolio. These permit changes/consolidations will all be subject to public notice.

Ecology noted that some of the bigger farms, who've reduced the annual amount they are using, can now use a mitigated new water right based on consolidated senior water rights rather than their junior interruptible water rights.

Public Comment (1:57:00min)

David Ortman provided comments on the Columbia River basin drought impacts report and related analysis including some differing information between that report and the Washington Academy of Sciences report. They noted that the 2021 Yakima Plan Status Report has not been updated and commented that it would be helpful for Ecology to schedule Chehalis basin strategy meetings at different times than the CRPAG meetings. Additional feedback was shared related to the Irrigation Sector Economic Impacts--Lower Snake River: Benchmark Review for Dam Breaching and Mitigation Costs, noting that it would have been nice to see a fishery impacts report shared at the same time as the irrigators report.

Groundwater Management Boundary- Pasco Basin (Tom Tebb)

Tom Tebb provided an update about establishing the groundwater management boundary for Pasco Basin as part of the Pasco Basin Groundwater Program (2:00:00 min on [TVW](#)). Ecology and Bureau of Reclamation spent last summer doing outreach (Tribes and municipalities) about the proposed boundary designation and rulemaking for this water development program. The first step to establish the groundwater management area boundary will be accomplished by amending the administrative order.

Tom noted that Pasco Basin Groundwater Project will be a similar program to the Quincy basin subarea program (WAC 173-134A-020) where artificially stored groundwater in the Quincy basin can be



permitted by Ecology, which then leads to a water service contract with the Bureau of Reclamation. A smaller portion of groundwater will be initially permitted to identify any possible concerns. This will go through SEPA and NEPA process. The rulemaking process will tell us how deep you can drill to reach the groundwater (in Quincy it's 200 ft). It may vary in Pasco depending on depth of alluvial materials. Some of the water is also tied up in some tight geological units so working with USGS to learn more and develop which buckets are readily available. Ecology is also working with the Bureau of Reclamation to run groundwater pumping scenarios to understand what groundwater withdrawal impacts would have on wetlands/drainages, etc. Tom expressed his excitement about this project moving forward since legislation was passed in 2021.

[Read more about the Pasco Basin](#)

[Odessa update \(Tom Tebb and Craig Simpson- 2:05:00 min\)](#)

Tom highlighted again the 2024 legislative budget proviso for \$5.5 million dollars for the Odessa project, specifically the East Low canal EL 22.1 pump station. This is a large pump station which will serve close to 17,000 acres of irrigated land from East Low Canal to Road W NE (10 miles east of Moses Lake). While this is big enough to be its own irrigation district it is part of the East Columbia Basin Irrigation district lands.

Last year, Ecology was able to leverage 39 million dollars from NRCS and other sources to initiate the Odessa groundwater project. Craig provided the following updates:

- The project is now procuring pipe for the EL 86.4 system which does go down to the South Columbia Basin district. Construction will commence as soon as Bureau of Reclamation gives 100% design approval.
- Odessa got an initial 5 million for adding acreage to EL 47.5 system that hadn't been put into contract. Craig shared that they signed a contract for the remaining 2000 acres, so they now will have a 10,000-acre delivery system that is fully subscribed/contracted.
- The investment Washington State has made has led to about 25% of that land covered by groundwater (20,000 acres) replaced through public and private pump stations.

[Membership and Vacancies – \(Rob Willis and Tom Tebb -2:11:00 min\)](#)

Rob and Tom shared that there are 5 open seats on the advisory group: environmental, city representative, WA business organization, power and conservation council, and an agricultural organization. Ecology has received three people interested in the open positions.

- Mike Ennis, Farm Bureau, Governmental Affairs Director
- Richard Law, city engineer, City of Moses Lake
- Annie Byerley, Walla Walla County Conservation District, Conservation Scientist



Tom reiterated that we are looking for these meetings to be meaningful so please pass along the invite to join the group. Rob chimed in that he is looking to schedule some meetings with advisory group members to gather feedback on the direction of these meetings moving forward.

Icicle Creek update (Tom Tebb- 2:14:30 min)

Tom Tebb noted that significant process has been made in Icicle Creek watershed. Ecology has been working with their partners to get the Leavenworth National Fish Hatchery (LNFH) shared water supply diversion reconstructed with new fish screens and without the Cascade Orchard Irrigation District diversion successful working. Ecology as part of the Icicle Creek watershed strategy is also working closely with Icicle-Peshastin Irrigation District and City of Leavenworth to update their fish screens as well.

Drought and Water Supply Presentation (Caroline Mellor)

Caroline shared information about the drought declaration & process and water supply and drought conditions ([view slides](#) - listen to [presentation on TVW](#) at (2:16:00 min). She noted snow conditions in the upper Columbia basin area is at 57% of normal (snow water equivalent) and 63% percent for Central Columbia, 87% of normal for Lower Columbia. Slides contain detailed figures and tables for the following metrics and forecasts: *Water Year Precipitation, Water Year Projection SWE by Basin, Streamflow forecast as % of normal, Streamflow forecast compared to record, Water Year Projection Precipitation, Snowpack and Precipitation, 10 Day Precipitation Forecast in ESP10, ESP10 Water Supply Forecasts, Natural Water Supply Forecast, ESP10 Water Supply Forecast (Monthly and Rankings), Streamflow forecasts by basin.*

NWRFC Water Supply Briefing noted that water supply forecasts largely mimic precipitation and snow conditions with extremely dry forecasts in the north (Canadian portion of the Columbia River Basin) and very wet forecasts in the south.

Overall water year 2024 has had above normal temperatures and normal to below normal precipitation for a majority of Washington. Water supply forecasts are a mix of normal to below normal, with some areas quite low compared to their historical record.

Key forecast takeaways are that water users should plan for a drier than normal year. The magnitude of impacts is different for different areas of the state and Ecology is closing monitoring conditions and coordinating with partners.

For more information visit the Water Supply Availability Committee [website](#)

Discussion

There was a question from Tom about the Yakima Basin Total Water supply availability. Caroline shared that Bureau of Reclamation forecast 63% forecasted for pro-rated water users with 51% for the new low (72% in March). This has gone down 11% from a forecast one month ago.



Wrap-up

The facilitation team will be sending out new meeting date in the next few weeks. The team apologized for the late reach out about this meeting date. All members will get a calendar invite with time/location, likely second week of July. Rob will be reaching out to CRPAG members to gather info about new agenda topics and ways we can work better together.

Tom wrapped up the meeting reiterating to reach out with agenda topics and with hopes of scheduling some time together in the field.

Meeting adjourned at 12:20.