

With everyone at the table, Yakima Basin is on target for watershed success

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Just last July, I had the opportunity to travel with Gov. Gregoire, Department of Commerce Director Rogers Weed and Agriculture Director Dan Newhouse on a tour highlighting the state's food crops.

The night before we picked cherries in Dan's orchard near Grandview, the Governor and I were briefed by members of the Yakima River Basin Water Enhancement Project Workgroup who shared with us their resolve to find lasting water solutions in the basin.

Here, water is perennially in short supply. Irrigators, cities, fisheries and tribal interests all need access to the same finite resource to support a \$3 billion agricultural industry, provide drinking water and ensure the survival of salmon and steelhead.

Buoyed by a sense of urgency, the diverse panel set aside historic differences and crafted a roadmap for success in the watershed. With unprecedented support earlier this month, they moved forward a plan that proposes major fish and habitat improvements alongside new water storage and conservation projects.

Expert facilitator Dan Silver calls the progress in the basin "astonishing." I couldn't agree more. For this, all the participants are to be congratulated. Unlike the past, all of the basin's key interests came to – and stayed at – one table, where they forged a compromise package that benefits all interests.

In June 2009, Ecology published the [Yakima Basin Integrated Water Resources Management Alternative](#), its final environmental impact statement (EIS) associated with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's [Yakima River Basin Water Storage Feasibility Study](#). This EIS was pursued after the Reclamation study determined construction of the proposed Black Rock reservoir didn't pencil out as economically feasible. That project proved to be too risky and expensive.

The "Black Rock" study didn't include an adequate assessment of possible watershed protections and enhancements. Both state and federal funding prospects were dim without endorsement from environmental and tribal interests. Once the Integrated Management Alternative was finished, Ecology's Office of Columbia River director Derek Sandison and the Bureau of Reclamation's Wendy Christensen helped convene the Yakima River Basin Water Enhancement Project Workgroup (YRBWEP).

The workgroup representing the basin's three counties, cities, fish and wildlife, irrigated agriculture and tribal interests met nearly monthly, while targeted subcommittees met even more frequently to flesh out the bones of the comprehensive plan.

Well-attended sessions at the Yakima Area Arboretum offered citizens the opportunity to provide comment. More opportunities for citizen input will be available during the formal environmental impact statement process over the next six to nine months.

Providing strong leadership are executive committee members Phil Rigdon, Yakama Nation; Mike Leita, Yakima County; Michael Garrity, American Rivers; Ron Van Gundy, Roza Irrigation District; Dawn Wiedmeier, Reclamation; and Derek Sandison, Ecology.

The result of this effort is an integrated approach that combines elements providing fish passage, habitat enhancement through watershed protection measures, together with modifying existing structures and operations, surface storage proposals, water marketing opportunities, groundwater storage and water conservation.

On Wednesday, March 9, the YRBWEP panel endorsed the environmental enhancement piece of the proposal. Helping to seal the deal, the plan gained the support of nine environmental interests, led by American Rivers.

Next, an implementation committee will prioritize projects and conduct a full environmental review. The goal is to fashion a request to Congress and the Washington Legislature for funding the integrated approach.

For the first time in nearly a century, the Yakima basin has a real shot at meaningful enhancements to the natural environment and increased water availability benefiting all the basin's diverse water needs.

By committing to compromise and sharing benefits, basin leaders are showing that hard, long-standing water challenges can be solved. But the work is far from over. Let's stay at the table, keep the public involved and stay on this fast track to real solutions. I want to applaud those leaders and pledge Ecology's continued support for this effort. Success here will pave the way for success elsewhere in the state.

A copy of the plan is online at:

<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/cwp/images/pdf/ProposedPlanDraft.pdf>

More information on the workgroup, its meeting notes and agendas is available at:

<http://www.usbr.gov/pn/programs/yrbwep/2010workgroup/index.html>

More information on Ecology's website at:

http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/cwp/cr_yak_storage.html