



Frequently Asked Questions about Proposed Water Efficiency Program for Columbia River Irrigators

Water Resource Program

Columbia River Initiative

Q: Why are some irrigation water rights along the Columbia River “interruptible?”

A: Water rights issued after 1980 are subject to a state stream-flow rule designed to ensure the availability of water for fish in the Columbia River mainstem. According to the rule, when the total amount of water flowing in the river at The Dalles Dam is forecast to be below 60 million acre-feet between April and September, water users with permits issued after 1980 may be ordered to stop using water.

Q: What prompted the Department of Ecology to take another look at these water rights?

A: The 2001 drought required Ecology to regulate these water rights for the first time since the rule was adopted. In response, an innovative water mitigation and conservation program allowed continued use of the water under these rights. In addition, irrigators filed suit challenging Ecology when it proposed to issue 11 new water rights that would have been subject to interruption when the 2000 NOAA Fisheries biological opinion flow objectives weren't met. This court action led to a settlement looking at ways to mitigate for future withdrawals from the Columbia. Under the settlement, Ecology also agreed to propose rules allowing water rights holders to obtain uninterrupted rights by paying a fee or using certain water efficient methods.

Q: Why is the option of obtaining uninterrupted water rights important to irrigators?

A: Many of the crops grown along the Columbia River are perennial crops, such as orchards and vineyards. Even though curtailing an interruptible water right would only occur about once in 25 years, the loss of water for more than 12 weeks in the middle of the irrigation season could kill fruit trees. This would lead to five or more years of crop loss and require considerable investment to plant new trees. This potential loss of investment has affected the ability of these water right holders to secure bank loans using property equity as repayment collateral.

Q: Are there other interruptible water rights in the state?

A: Yes. For example, water users along the Methow, Okanogan and Wenatchee rivers often have to curtail water use when flows drop too low.

Q: What is being proposed as a way to obtain an uninterrupted water right?

A: Ecology and the Columbia-Snake River Irrigators Association are exploring ways irrigators who divert water from the Columbia River might minimize any effects of their withdrawals. A water-efficiency program, for instance, could require the implementation of water conservation Best Management Practices (BMPs) or a monetary compensation plan to obtain an uninterrupted right. The BMPs are being reviewed by experts in irrigation and conservation measures.

Q: What is meant by “best management practices?”

A: Best management practices (BMPs) are a combination of institutional and operational practices that are recognized by agricultural and engineering professionals as a reasonable and economical means to irrigate commercial crops and other landscapes.



Q: Who could participate?

A: There are approximately 330 existing interruptible water-right holders that would be eligible to participate in this voluntary program. These water rights are a small percentage of the total diversions from the mainstem.

Q: Would all water-right holders have to meet the same criteria to qualify?

A: The proposed BMPs vary depending on how many acres are irrigated and whether the owners are public or private entities.

Q: Is a monetary component being considered for this program?

A: Until an economic study has been completed, the potential financial impacts of such a program on those choosing to participate are unknown. Under the legal settlement, a monetary component would be an alternative to using BMPs for those still wishing to have uninterruptible rights. The principal behind the compensation portion of the program is that a small fee would be collected every year, which would accumulate and then be used to purchase water to offset the effects of water withdrawals from the river when the formerly-interruptible rights are allowed to continue pumping.

Q: Is it certain that irrigators would no longer be subject to 1980 stream-flow levels if they participate in this plan?

A: Ecology agreed to develop and propose a rule for ways that interruptible right holders could convert to a non-interruptible right. However, this change can only occur through a rulemaking process with public involvement. During that process, Ecology must consider all comments and recommendations submitted before making a final decision.

Q: How would this proposal fit into the state's overall Columbia River Initiative to develop a new rule for managing water uses of the Columbia?

A: Conservation BMPs are one of three facets being considered as the state continues the process of developing a new management scheme for the Columbia River. Currently, an independent panel of scientists is formally reviewing the existing science related to fish survival and hydrology in the Columbia River. This review is being conducted by the National Academy of Sciences.

In addition, a study is under way examining regional economics in the Columbia Basin and how water use is related to economic value and returns. Ecology will use the information generated by the economic study, along with other information developed by the Columbia River Initiative, to prepare a draft management program for public review.

For more information:

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Information on CRI through Ecology's Web site at:
www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/cri/crihome.html.