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8:30 AM – 10:00 AM

SESSION 57: Panel - An Integrated Approach to Resolving Water Use Conflicts in the Yakima River Basin

Moderator – Robert Montgomery
Anchor QEA, LLC, Kirkland, WA

Panel Participants

Ann Root, ESA Adolfson, Seattle, WA
Robert Montgomery, Anchor QEA, Kirkland, Washington
Derek Sandison, Office of Columbia River, Washington Department of Ecology, Wenatchee, WA
Robert Anderson, Golder Associates, Redmond, Washington
Thomas Ring, Yakama Nation, Toppenish, WA

The Yakima River basin is one of the most productive irrigated agricultural areas in the West and historically supported large runs of anadromous salmonids. However, salmon runs have declined drastically and farmers experience water shortages during drought years. Over the years, a number of solutions have been proposed to address water resource problems in the basin, including the Yakima River Basin Water Enhancement Program (YRBWEP) which has provided state and federal funding for projects, including conservation and water rights acquisition. Recently the Washington State Department of Ecology (Ecology) and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) evaluated opportunities for increased storage in the basin. As part of the Draft Planning Report/Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) released in January 2008, they jointly evaluated traditional storage facilities—Black Rock and Wymer Reservoirs—and Ecology evaluated the nonstorage options of enhanced water conservation, groundwater storage, and water marketing. Comments on the Draft EIS stated that the agencies had not considered a broad enough range of alternatives and that the alternatives had not included actions that would improve fish passage or habitat. The comments advocated an integrated approach to benefit all resources in the basin. In response to those comments, Ecology facilitated the development of an integrated approach to improve habitat for anadromous and resident fish and water supply for irrigated agriculture and future municipal needs in the basin. The integrated approach includes fish passage at existing dams to open up high quality habitat, new surface water and groundwater storage facilities, modifications to existing operations, fish habitat improvements, an aggressive program of water conservation, and water marketing. The integrated approach was developed in cooperation with representatives from the Yakama Nation, Reclamation, basin irrigation districts, and fisheries managers. The elements of the integrated approach were evaluated in an EIS released in June 2009. Ecology and Reclamation are currently working with other stakeholders in the Yakima basin to propose Phase III of YRBWEP for Congressional authorization and funding. The panel, who are involved in the project, will describe the individual elements of the alternative and the challenges of developing and implementing an integrated approach to water resource problems.