



# The Enterprise

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## **Watershed planners reach impasse; local water rights issues in limbo**

Story by: Jesse Burkhardt

After five years of effort, the work of Watershed Resource Inventory Area 29 (WRIA) committee has ended without a watershed plan in place.

"What happened was, the planning unit group dissolved. They decided it was futile to continue with that particular group," explained Charly Boyd, a Skamania County Planning Department employee and the coordinator of the WRIA 29 process.

WRIA 29's planning area stretched across portions of Skamania County and Klickitat County. It covered the Wind River, Rock Creek, Little White Salmon River, White Salmon River, Jewett Creek, Catherine Creek, and Major Creek.

Meeting in Stevenson on June 8, members of the WRIA group voted to break the planning unit in two, so the watershed areas of Skamania County could complete their plan.

Watershed planning for western Klickitat County was halted.

"A watershed planning study will go forward for Rock Creek, the Little White Salmon River, and the Wind River. It will cease for the White Salmon River, Jewett Creek, Catherine Creek, and Major Creek," Boyd said.

The watershed planning process stemmed from a 1998 law passed by the Washington Legislature. The legislation was geared to "develop a more thorough and cooperative method of determining what the current water resource situation is in each water resource inventory area of the state [there were 62 water inventory areas around the state] and to provide local citizens with the maximum possible input concerning their goals and objectives for water resource management and development."

The Washington Department of Ecology awarded its first grant for local watershed planning in June 1999, and the initial WRIA meeting was held on May 9, 2000. Since then, the committee had met about once a month.

Klickitat County Commissioner Don Struck said he regretted that no plan could be fashioned.

"It has been five years of hard work, and it's disappointing to get to this point," Struck said. "We should have been able to adopt a plan. The idea was to determine how much water we have in our watershed and decide how it could be used. Most of these people were meeting monthly or twice a month. It was a heck of a commitment."

Klickitat County and Skamania County were among the "initiating governments" overseeing the regional watershed study. The Board of

County Commissioners for each county appointed representatives to serve on the WRIA planning board, which comprised 27 different interest groups.

According to some who served on the committee, WRIA 29 bogged down with disputes over what impact a watershed plan would have on the availability of water rights in the area.

Boyd characterized the impasse as a "split between Trout Lake agricultural and irrigation interests, and more property rights interests."

According to Struck, the main sticking point was uncertainty about what measuring stream flows would mean for water rights development in the region.

"I think the issue of in-stream flows was the key," Struck explained. "We were led to believe DOE would set minimum in-stream flows. What does that mean, and how would it affect irrigators? We don't want to hamstring them. Would that mean they would have to cut back on their water rights? We never got a clear, concise answer from DOE. It's more of a fish issue, and there is a lot of apprehension that fish will become the focal point, and ag folks would take a secondary position."

Boyd pointed out that without a watershed plan, the water rights development process will remain "status quo." In effect, no new water rights will be allowed, and the Washington Department of Ecology will make the decisions about whether more water rights can be granted across the entire watershed.

Scott McKinney, watershed lead official for WDOE in Olympia, said those who didn't want to create a plan were being shortsighted.

"They were concerned any actions or recommendations in the plan might encourage WDOE to set in-stream flows, and they didn't want that," McKinney said. "The reality is, that's going to happen anyway. It was a missed opportunity for the county."

McKinney explained that having a watershed plan would have given WDOE a stronger basis to work from, because it gives the agency an analysis of water use and water needs.

"Once that groundwork is set, it makes it easier for us, helps us to process water rights," McKinney said. "I don't see how being silent can help. This was an opportunity to bring local values and local interests into watershed planning. Now, that's not going to happen."

"I'd sure prefer our grass roots effort making those recommendations, but it's not looking like that. We may end up at the mercy of the DOE," Struck conceded.

Brooks Heard, a former WRIA committee member from Trout Lake, said he could see the impasse coming for a long time.

"I was on board as a citizen at large member for two and a half years," Heard said. "I resigned because it seemed not to be going anywhere."

Heard said he believed there were factions on the committee from the Husum-BZ Corner area that did not want the planning process to go forward.

"They won the battle and I fear they're going to lose the war," he said. "The larger issue is to wrest control of water rights decision-making from the state and put it into more local control. That war is clearly lost. Their strategy was flawed. The net effect of this is to have the Department of Ecology in complete control, and in essence, that means no new water rights."

Dave Howard, a WDOE representative who served on the WRIA board, also expressed regret that no plan could be reached. However, in an e-mail he sent to all the WRIA committee members, he added that he hoped some good would come from the years of work on the watershed.

"While I am sorry that the final product will not be an adopted plan, the process has produced a significant amount of information about the watersheds of WRIA 29," Howard wrote. "Local governments and concerned citizens have been given a voice in watershed issues. The fact that a significant minority of the Planning Unit was unable to get past their fears of what would happen to the water if they agreed to anything in the plan is regrettable."

Heard said the study should not have been difficult to create.

"What they [WDOE] wanted was for the committee to measure our water," Heard explained. "What you need is a coherent strategy. The DOE is the boss, and he wants a report. Give the boss the report. It's there on the shelf, and then things are quiet. Instead, they've stirred the pot and called attention and drawn a bull's-eye around our area. The end result is that we've moved inexorably toward adjudication of the water resources in the basin. There will be no winners in that, only losers. This is going to hurt developers."

Commissioner Struck said he was hopeful a consensus could still be reached on watershed planning for the area.

"We'll regroup and work on the White Salmon watershed," Struck said. "I'm hopeful if we have a cooling off period, everybody can catch their breaths and realize how important it is to come back to the table. We'll let it cool, then revisit it again in late summer."

McKinney said he didn't believe that was a viable approach. He pointed out that the WDOE had invested nearly \$500,000 on the watershed study, and there were countless hours of volunteer time.

"Working with them has been a real struggle for several years. If Klickitat County wants to come back to the table at this point, that would be a bit out of line," he said.

The watershed plan was due at the end of June.