



## Columbia River Policy Advisory Group

**January 23, 2025**

**Hybrid Meeting – Online via Zoom**

### **Meeting Summary**

Slides and recording available at the [CRPAG website](#)

### Welcome and Introductions

Melissa Downes (WA Ecology) and Rob Willis (Facilitator, Ross Strategic) opened the meeting by welcoming the group and sharing an overview of the meeting agenda. Melissa noted an update to the agenda due to BPA pausing on public engagements temporarily. Rob highlighted that the focus of the meeting will be a discussion session with the WSU Forecast Team.

### Understanding the Usefulness and Impact of Previous Columbia River Basin Water Supply and Demand Forecasts

Melissa Downes introduced this conversation by reminding the group that, by statute, the Columbia River Basin long-term water supply and demand forecast is required to be updated every five years. The next one due in November 2026 and OCR is in the early stages of working on the forecast with the WSU Forecast Team.

Sonia Hall (WSU, Center for Sustaining Agriculture and Natural Resources) provided a brief review of past water supply and demand forecasts from 2006, 2011, 2016, and 2021, which focused on understanding the drivers of change in water supply and demand through integrated modeling efforts to make 20-year projections. For the 2026 forecast, the WSU Forecast Team presented their work and sought input from the CRPAG at the October 2023 meeting.

Today's discussion focused on the Impact Analysis module aimed at evaluating the relevance and impact of the broad take-home messages and themes from previous forecasts. The WSU Forecast Team seeks to understand how extensively the products and data from these forecasts have been used and shared to inform future efforts and improve the utility of upcoming forecasts.

Presentation slides are available on the WA Ecology CRPAG website ([view slides](#)) and on TVW ([view presentation](#) at 00:05:00).

### *Discussion*

Sonia posed a series of questions to the group and facilitated discussion amongst the CRPAG members. Below are highlights from the discussion.

### Anticipated Future Changes to Water Supply and Demand and Associated Potential Vulnerabilities

- **Biological opinion flow targets are often unmet**, especially during low water conditions in the spring and summer. These targets are goals, not legally binding regulations.

- **Declining groundwater levels in deep aquifers**, which many Columbia Basin communities have relied on for generations. There is an increasing the need to find alternative water sources, including the Columbia River.
- **Additional flows may be needed for agricultural purposes**, as well as municipal and industrial purposes.
- **Increasing instances of low stream flows** in the summer months impacting salmon spawning as well as high flow events, such as floods, that disrupt hydraulic regimes.
- **The shift in timing of water flows** has implications for water policy and flow regulation on the Columbia River.
- **Climate change impacting the types of crops grown** in the Walla Walla Basin due to the lack of summer water rights and needing to adjust crops based on water availability.

#### Data Needs and Forecast Improvements

- **Understanding of the interactions between groundwater and surface water.**
- **Incorporating groundwater data** into forecasts is crucial for providing more comprehensive information, helping the agricultural sector optimize water use, and improve overall future water management.
- **Conversations between in-stream flow users and agricultural water users.** To date, the forecasts have not been effective in Walla Walla for driving these conversations.
- The long-term forecasts have been helpful in demonstrating the viability and reliability of Columbia River water, which is crucial for communities seeking legal access to this water source to support growth and sustainability.
- Continuity in providing short synopses of information for new Commissioners.
- **Balancing water permits between municipalities and large industries** moving to the Columbia Basin. There is a need for tools with clear guidelines on how much water can be allocated to different sectors to help planning departments regulate water use and maintain a balance to ensure that new permits do not deplete resources for agriculture or municipalities.
- **Detailed, basin-specific guidance** on water supply availability to support funding proposals and help local jurisdictions manage their water supply and usage. This could also help drive water policy conversations by helping policymakers and legislators understand and address changes in water use and timing due to shifting hydrographs in a changing climate.
- **Understanding the impact of changing growing seasons** as they become longer, earlier in the year, and have multiple crops grown each year. There is an interest in understanding whether shifting the agricultural irrigation season earlier in the year, as mentioned in the 2021 forecast, could benefit instream flows. Specifically, if starting crops earlier and reducing irrigation water use during the late season could positively impact streamflow.
- **Significant changes happening across the different basins** to explore for future forecasts include impacts of the Columbia River Treaty, removal of the four Lower Snake River dams, Columbia Basin project expansion, Odessa Groundwater Replacement Project, Yakima Basin Integrated Plan, Icicle Strategy, various storage projects, and the quantification of tribal water rights out of Lake Roosevelt.

### Ideas to Make the Forecasts More Usable

CRPAG members suggested in-person presentations throughout the basin with planning groups, ensuring that the reports are accessible and understandable for legislators, commissioners, and regulators, and integrating long-term technical analysis (up to 2040 or 2070) into near-term policy and project decisions. This integration would make the report more useful for those working on immediate projects in various basins and along the Columbia and Snake Rivers.

### Additional Discussion

One CRPAG member asked where to find information on the accuracy of past forecasts. Sonia and Dr. Sasha McLarty (WSU) explain that assessing the accuracy of past forecasts is challenging to evaluate short-term changes because these forecasts compare 30-year windows. They do compare model outputs to historical observations for surface water, crop modeling, and groundwater within each analysis round to ensure accuracy to the best of their ability.

Another CRPAG member inquired if the WSU team is collaborating with the team conducting the pump storage hydropower study, noting the potential additional draw on water supply. They also raised concerns about the impact of the Columbia River Treaty and the need to consider changing time windows for water management. Sonia responded that the WSU Forecast Team is not directly involved with the pump storage study, though acknowledged the importance of considering these changes. They have also had conversations around the Columbia River Treaty and there may be more specific information coming out soon.

## 2026 Columbia River Basin Water Supply and Demand Forecast Update

Dr. Sasha McLarty (WSU, Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering), project lead, provided a detailed overview of the 2026 Forecast development. Unlike previous forecasts which involved tier analysis scenarios, the 2026 Forecast focuses on integrating new science, policy-relevant questions with urgency, and more streamlined and shorter products for State Legislature.

The 2026 Forecast focuses on six modules: Impact Analysis, Groundwater Modeling, Water Conservation, Back-to-back Drought, Climate Data Improvements, and Temporary Worker Housing Demand. For each module, Dr. McLarty detailed the primary impacts on management and research and integration efforts across the research teams, state agencies, state caucus, and other stakeholders. The modules aim to provide useful resources for community and decision-making needs. Dr. McLarty also outlined their outreach and feedback approach, which includes holding state caucus meetings every six months and conducting public meetings with a comment period. Input from stakeholders will be incorporated into the final report.

Dr. McLarty's slides are available on the WA Ecology CRPAG website ([view slides](#)) and on TVW ([view presentation](#) at 01:09:12).

### Discussion

Dr. McLarty sought input from the CRPAG members on the six modules and help identifying any missing priority areas, data, or information. Even if not in the scope for the 2026 Forecast, feedback will also inform the 2031 report. Below are highlights from the discussion.



Interest was expressed in the groundwater model for the Columbia Basin, specifically any future updates regarding deep basalt versus shallow aquifers. Dr. McLarty confirmed the model is publicly available through USGS and mentioned ongoing groundwater monitoring efforts in partnership with local entities to improve the model. CRPAG members also inquired about considerations with fisheries co-managers and tribes and OCR's rulemaking to access Reclamation groundwater resources in the Pasco Basin which is within the modeling domain. Dr. McLarty acknowledged the need to expand and consider both.

Suggestions included using the module on changing growing seasons and agricultural decisions impacting instream flows to build on the water conservation module. Dr. McLarty agreed, noting that they could reference 2021 results and consider partial inclusion now, while considering it more fully in future integrated surface water and groundwater modeling.

A module on economic trends focused on new water users like AI and data centers was also suggested. Dr. McLarty noted that while no new modules for 2026 will be added, they could include context on how current modules influence larger conversations and consider industrial trends for future forecasts. One CRPAG member highlighted the large influx of workers anticipated over the next 6-10 years due to industrial projects and impacts of increased housing and water usage.

Interest was also expressed in understanding the impact of irrigated acres coming out of production in California on Washington's markets. Climate migration and increasing demand for agricultural products to be grown in Washington is a concern.

Dr. McLarty and Melissa Downes concluded the discussion by thanking CRPAG members for their input and mentioning future opportunities for input into the forecast process over the next 15 or so months.

## OCR Announcements

Melissa Downes shared the news of Tom Tebb's retirement as Director of OCR, with his last day in office on February 21, 2025. Unfortunately, due to a last-minute call to the Legislature and technical difficulties, Tom was unable to join the Zoom meeting. In early January, Ecology Director Laura Watson announced the appointment Larry Mattson as the new OCR Director, starting February 3, 2025. Larry Mattson greeted the group and expressed excitement and eagerness to join and meet members in-person at upcoming meetings. More time will be dedicated to a meet and greet and Q&A session with Larry at the April CRPAG meeting.

## Legislative and Budget Update

Melissa Downes provided an update on Governor Inslee's proposed operating, capital, and transportation budgets. OCR received small reductions in proposed budgets for the Yakima Basin Integrated Plan (17% reduction) and the greater Columbia River Basin (5% reduction). Incoming Governor Ferguson has outlined some budget priorities but has not yet proposed an official budget. The announcement about Governor Ferguson's budget priorities is available [here](#). The Legislature will be working on the budget through March.



Melissa also mentioned the several transitions happening within the Ecology including Ecology Director Laura Watson moving to the Attorney General's office, Casey Sixkiller starting as the new Ecology Director, and the transition between Tom Tebb and Larry Mattson expected in February. The Legislative session is in full swing, and Melissa provided updates on several Senate bills relevant to OCR's work including SB 5155, SB 5212, SB 5261, and SB 5303.

Melissa's update is available on TVW ([view presentation](#) at 01:42:40).

### Public Comment (01:57:20)

David E. Ortman requested that CRPAG meeting summaries be posted to the website in a timelier manner, specifically, the October 2024 meeting summary. Mr. Ortman provided comments regarding a WA Senate Committee holding a hearing for SB 5303, stating that they forwarded a copy of testimony of several conservation groups opposing this bill because in 2013, the Legislature required that if the 214,000-acre water was not permitted and funded by June 30, 2025, the land would be returned to the Common School Trust. This is not going to happen, and the bill will extend this timeline to 2035. Mr. Ortman also mentioned the December 1, 2021, report to the Legislature that Ecology did not submit and or keep the public informed on. Mr. Ortman expressed the need for OCR to fill the vacant environmental seat, noting that in 2006, the Washington Environmental Council was included, but the seat has been vacant ever since they stopped participating. Mr. Ortman concluded by noting the importance of the Alpine Lakes Wilderness and criticized the lack of attention to it in discussions about water supplies in the Icicle River Basin.

Henry Brannan, a reporter from The Columbian, comments included an invitation to anyone with story ideas or important information about the Columbia River to contact him. Mr. Brannan mentioned they are interested in covering all perspectives and interests related to the river and encouraged folks to find their contact information online and share with others.

### Wrap-up

Rob Willis concluded the meeting by sharing that all meeting materials will be uploaded to the CRPAG website, and that the next meeting will be on April 17<sup>th</sup> in Ellensburg, WA. Rob also mentioned that there will be a field tour as part of the July CRPAG meeting, and more details will be shared soon. Melissa offered that if any CRPAG members have topics to propose for future agendas to reach out to the facilitation team. Melissa also relayed a message from Tom Tebb that he was bummed to miss this meeting but hopes to see folks over the course of his remaining six weeks. Rob and Melissa expressed gratitude to everyone who attended.

The meeting adjourned at 11:25am.

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## Attendees

### *CRPAG members & alternates:*

Annie Byerley, Walla Walla CD  
B.J. Kieffer, Spokane Tribe  
Bruce Wakefield, Confederated Tribes of the  
Colville Reservation  
Chad McCrea, Spokane Tribe  
Chris Kowitz, OWRD  
Chris Marks, CTUIR  
Clint Didier, Franklin County Commission  
Craig Simpson, ECBID  
Darryll Olsen, Columbia-Snake Rivers Irrigation  
Association  
Jerome Delvin, Benton County Commission  
Jo Gilchrist, Lincoln County Commission

John Stuhmiller, WA State Water Resources  
Association  
Jon Culp, WA State Conservation Commission  
Larry Mattson, OCR/Ecology  
Lori Zoller, Klickitat County Commission  
Megan Kernan, WDFW  
Melissa Downes, OCR/Ecology  
Mike Schwisow, Columbia Basin Development  
League  
Richard Law, City of Moses Lake  
Sarah Dyrdaahl, American Rivers  
Theo Burgoon, Trout Unlimited

### *Guests & staff:*

Becky Casey, WSU  
Carl Merkle, CTUIR  
Christina Frantz, WA DNR  
David Ortman  
Dan Haller, Aspect Consulting  
Fred Ziari, Landau Associates  
Georgine Yorgey, WSU  
Guillaume Mauger, WA State Climatologist  
Henry Brannan, The Columbian  
Jeff Dengel, WDFW  
John Crotty  
Keaton Curtice, Klickitat County Commission

Marcus Zinecker  
Margie Van Cleve, Washington Conservation  
Action  
Mikahala Waters, Alta  
Nate White, WDFW  
Norman Semanko, Parsons Behle & Latimer  
Raquel Ferrell Crowley, Culton Consulting  
Seann McClure, Aspect Consulting  
Stuart Crane, Yakama Nation  
Ted Knight  
Tom McDonald, Cascadia Law Group

### *Facilitation:*

Piper Casey, Ross Strategic  
Rob Willis, Ross Strategic