



Columbia River Policy Advisory Group

April 17, 2025

Hybrid Meeting – Hal Holmes Community Center, Ellensburg and 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, both in-person and online, and sharing an overview of the meeting agenda.

Drought and Water Supply Update

Drought declaration and process

Caroline Mellor (WA Ecology) provided an update on Ecology's drought declaration in the Upper Yakima, Lower Yakima and Naches watersheds due to low reservoir storage and compounding deficits from previous years. A drought advisory was issued for areas with concerning snowpack levels, indicating potential future drought conditions.

Drought conditions are defined as receiving less than 75% of normal water supply and undue hardship for water users or the environment. Drought declaration enables expedited processing of emergency water transfer applications, drought permits, and funding for governmental entities (counties, cities, utilities, tribes, irrigation districts, etc.). Drought response grant projects include leasing water for irrigation districts, transporting water for small public systems, and modifying stream channels adjacent to a hatchery. Drought advisory areas are closely monitored, but do not activate drought relief tools. Voluntary actions are encouraged to support drought response if conditions worsen.

Water supply outlook

Caroline shared several graphs depicting snowpack conditions, precipitation projections, and the temperature outlook for the upcoming months. The statewide snowpack is 81% normal and the Upper Columbia Basin is at 69%, with significant variation across different areas. Streamflow forecasts show concern in areas like Okanogan and Methow. The water year projection for remaining snowpack shows variability, with the Upper Columbia Basin trending towards below-normal levels (70-89%). Summer 2025 is projected to be hotter and drier than normal. Even with above normal March precipitation in the Yakima region, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's April-September Total Water Supply Available (TWSA) for pro-ratable water right holders only went up from 48% to 58%.

Caroline highlighted the importance of monitoring these trends, coordination among various stakeholders, and shared several drought resources:

- Ecology's drought response: <https://ecology.wa.gov/water-shorelines/water-supply/water-availability/statewide-conditions/drought-response>
- Drought declaration press release: <https://ecology.wa.gov/about-us/who-we-are/news/2025/april-8-drought>



- Order for Declaration: [2025 April - Order and Determination by the Director](#)
- Drought Emergency Grant Guidance: [2025 Drought Response Grant Funding Guidance](#)
- Water Supply Availability Committee (WSAC) monthly reportings and slides: Available [here](#)

Presentation slides are available on the WA Ecology CRPAG website ([view slides](#)) and on TVW ([view presentation](#) at 00:02:40).

Discussion

One participant sought clarification on the term “percent of normal” used in data. Caroline explained that this refers to the 30-year average which is updated every 10 years. The current period is 1991-2020. She also noted that some data sets reference the “period of record” (POR), which begins in 1949.

Melissa Downes (WA Ecology) added that for those monitoring the Columbia River mainstem, the April-September runoff forecast was approximately 79,000 acre-feet which is above the threshold used in the Columbia River Rule, which has a separate drought definition from the statewide standard.

Introduction with Larry Mattson, Director of Office of Columbia River

Larry Mattson (WA Ecology) shared his background and leadership philosophies, shaped by his predecessors and his own career. Drawing inspiration from former directors Derek Sandison and Tom Tebb, Larry highlighted three key traits he aims to emulate: creativity, drive, and diplomacy. He underscored the importance of innovative solutions for water supply challenges, action-oriented project management, and building meaningful relationships through informal, behind-the-scenes engagement.

Larry’s career began as a land use planner, where he adopted collaborative problem-solving. His nearly fifteen years in environmental documentation and compliance taught him the value of having practical alternatives. Inspired by the book *Design with Nature* by Ian McHarg, Larry advocates for simple, effective solutions that minimize engineering complexity to reduce long-term maintenance costs. Larry concluded by expressing his excitement to connect with PAG members and to explore how to best leverage the group’s expertise.

Larry’s introduction is available on TVW ([view presentation](#) at 00:27:10).

Columbia River Caucus Update

Commissioner Jo Gilchrist (Lincoln County) provided an update on the Columbia River Counties Caucus, comprised of commissioners from counties in the Columbia River Basin. The group met virtually on March 5, 2025, and appointed the following representatives to the CRPAG:

Primary Commissioners:

- Jo Gilchrist, Lincoln County
- Jerome Delvin, Benton County
- LeDon Linde, Yakima County
- Asa Leckie, Skamania County

Alternates:

- Lori Zoller, Klickitat County
- Brett Wachsmith, Kittitas County
- Clint Didier, Franklin County
- Scott Hutsell, Lincoln County

Recent elections resulted in 23 new county commissioners and the Washington State Association of Counties (WSAC) hosted a three-day training course designed to help newly elected officials gain insight



into key issues and responsibilities including water supply. The March meeting included updates from OCR and a presentation on water banking. Topics of interest for the caucus include municipal well use, new state requirements from OCR, the Columbia River Treaty, water banking, PFAS, and the Upper Columbia Superfund designation.

Commissioner Gilchrist's update is available on TVW ([view presentation](#) at 00:42:50).

Updates on the Bi-State Protected Waters in the Walla Walla Basin

Chris Kowitz (Oregon Water Resources Department) and Jamie Short (WA Ecology) presented a case study on the first implementation of bi-state water management legislation in the Walla Walla Basin, a collaborative effort between Washington, Oregon, and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

Chris provided background on the Walla Walla Water 2050 plan; a 30-year vision developed over the past five years. The plan has a Basin Advisory Committee, which advises the tri-sovereign group on policy and project implementation. Chris noted that recent legislation in both states enables new tools for cross-border water coordination, including MOUs and the potential for an interstate compact. Chris also described the City of Walla Walla's participation in Oregon's split-season leasing program, which allows for both consumptive use and instream flow protection.

Jamie highlighted the significance of the first application from Oregon for Washington's trust program involving an Oregon water right. Previously, there was no legal mechanism to protect water once it crossed the state line. The project aimed to retain water in Mill Creek to meet the target of 8 CFS instream flow, starting in August 2024. However, challenges arose when flows in Yellow Hawk Creek declined, revealing inaccuracies in USGS gauge data.

Ecology responded by shifting to manual flow measurements, working with fishery co-managers, and updating decision-making protocols and public outreach. They are drafting a policy to clarify the use of the developed water program.

Chris and Jamie emphasized the importance of collaboration, accurate data, and consensus-based governance in managing the basin's water resources and noted that ongoing support from state and federal officials will be essential for implementing these strategies effectively.

Presentation slides are available on the WA Ecology CRPAG website ([view slides](#)) and on TVW ([view presentation](#) at 00:57:20).

Discussion

A CRPAG member asked about the timeline for implementing bi-state water projects and whether any involve diverting water from the Columbia River. Jaime referenced the Anchor Project, which includes a suite of potential projects that involve substituting Columbia River water for existing Oregon and Walla Walla water rights. Chris noted the complexity of transferring water across state lines and emphasized the need for integrated basin-wide planning. He estimated full implementation would take 7–10 years, following a basin study in 2026 and a subsequent PEIS.



Another member inquired about managing annual flow variability and establishing base flows. Chris explained Oregon's leasing program requires proof of water right usage, with protection limited to specific times and volumes. Jamie added that Washington is working to define and protect minimum flows to support fish habitat during low-flow periods.

WA State Climate Resilience Strategy Update

Jimmy Kralj (WA Ecology), following up from his October 2024 presentation to the CRPAG, provided an update on the implementation of the state's new Climate Resilience Strategy. Since then, agencies have submitted budget requests to support the strategy's actions, many of which were included in the Governor's proposed budget. Despite some budget challenges, the strategy remains a priority.

Jimmy reviewed the relevant actions that are in the proposed budgets and those no longer in progress. Ecology is also developing metrics to monitor progress and advancing actions with existing resources. He highlighted ongoing legislative work and the importance of tracking outcomes in climate resilience across Washington.

Presentation slides are available on the WA Ecology CRPAG website ([view slides](#)) and on TVW ([view presentation](#)) at 01:34:30).

Discussion

One participant asked if there were any estimates of the current costs the state is incurring for climate resilience initiatives, any potential costs of implementing unfunded infrastructure adaptations, and the cost of damages associated with a lack of resilience. Jimmy acknowledged the complexity of estimating such figures but noted that the Climate Resilience Strategy document includes cost estimates for implementing proposed actions and provides a framework for understanding investment needs.

2025 Legislative Session Summary

Washington

Noah Wentzel (WA Ecology) provided a summary of the WA State legislative session and bills that Washington Water Resources and OCR have been tracking. There were very few bills this year related to water. Noah noted two Ecology request bills: HB 1789/ESSB 5175 (photovoltaic recycling) passed, and SB 5174 (wood burning appliances) did not pass. Key water bills that passed include:

- ESSB 5303 (HB 1691): Extends existing deadline for the Yakima Basin Integrated Plan to achieve new water storage milestone under RCW 90.38
- SSB 5212: Authorizes submission of unregistered claims to WRIA 1 adjudication intake process

Inactive water bills that may come back next year include SB 5261 (foster exception for micro-hydropower permitting) and SB 5640 (adequate water supply for energy facility permitting).

Other notable bills include active bills HB 1615 (water system classifications), HB 1039/SSB 5301 (extending governmental services to tribal lands) and inactive bills HB 1818/SB 5633 (subdivision of land), HB 1345/SB 5470 (rural ADUs), and SSB 5117 (protecting agriculture).



Noah's presentation slides are available on the WA Ecology CRPAG website ([view slides](#)) and on TVW ([view presentation](#) at 01:52:00).

Discussion

One CRPAG member inquired whether SB 5640 is related to a specific case. Noah clarified that the bill is not tied to one specific project but resulted from experiences with FSEC (Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council) process. The bill addresses the lack of early public visibility into water supply plans for proposed projects. By the time an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is published, projects are often too far along to make meaningful changes if water supply issues arise. The bill aims to ensure that water supply compliance with Ecology's regulations is considered earlier in the permitting process.

Oregon

Chris Kowitz (Oregon Water Resources Department) provided a summary of the OR State legislative session on behalf of OWRD's legislative coordinator. Chris noted a high volume of water-related bills and that many have been referred to Rules or Ways and Means so the session will go through mid-June. Detailed information regarding water bills can be found on the Oregon Legislature's Water Caucus website [here](#). Key water bills include:

- HB 2988: Study bill that directs agencies to identify and reduce barriers and provide technical assistance for aquifer recharge and aquifer storage and recovery
- HB 3106: Continuation of funding for the Oregon Water Data Portal
- SB 1153: Adds public interest review to water right transfers
- SB 761: Funding for implementation of Walla Walla Water 2050
- SB 1154: Updates groundwater management area statute

Chris's presentation slides are available on the WA Ecology CRPAG website ([view slides](#)) and on TVW ([view presentation](#) at 02:10:50).

Discussion

One CRPAG member asked for clarification on SB 1153. Chris explained the bill aims to align transfer reviews with new water right applications by adding a public interest review which current change transfer rules lack.

Another participant inquired whether there have been any policy implications related to data centers and water use. Chris and Noah noted no current legislation addresses this directly. So far, data centers have relied on existing municipal supplies, avoiding new water allocations.

OCR Capital Budget Update

Melissa Downes (WA Ecology) provided an overview of OCR's capital budget request and status:

Original Request: \$120.5M total

- \$57.5M for OCR project implementation
- \$59.0M for Yakima Basin Integrated Plan
- \$4.0M for YRBWEP Phase II - Conservation

Governor's Budget: \$107M total (11% reduction)

- The budget was released after the December 2024 revenue forecast showing a multi-billion-dollar shortfall in the operating budget which resulted in travel, hiring, contracting, and supply purchasing freezes on state agencies.
- Four OCR projects were zeroed out, including a drought insurance proposal and municipal feasibility studies.

House Budget for OCR: \$36M total (26% reduction)

- Significant cuts fund only 6 of the 22 proposed projects.
- Prioritizes \$25M for the Odessa Groundwater Replacement Project.

Senate Budget for OCR: \$69M total (4% increase)

- Includes an additional \$14M for Odessa Groundwater Replacement Project.

OCR has requested flexibility to distribute reduced funding across more projects. Final budget decisions are expected by April 27, 2025, and a revised project list will be presented at the July 2025 PAG meeting if cuts remain.

Melissa's update is available on the WA Ecology CRPAG website ([view slides](#)) and on TVW ([view presentation](#)) at 02:23:20).

Public Comment (02:33:00)

David E. Ortman provided comments on the Walla Walla presentation, noting the absence of references to the 2009 watershed partnership and a 2020 state audit. He raised concerns about proposed water supply development in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness and questioned the long-term cost-effectiveness of the Yakima Basin Integrated Plan. Mr. Ortman pointed out that the state has not yet met its 2025 milestone for new water supply development and referenced several projects that have been delayed or reevaluated. He encouraged greater transparency around project costs and outcomes. To conclude, Mr. Ortman asked whether the long-vacant environmental seat on the Policy Advisory Group would be filled under the new OCR leadership.

Member Announcements, Wrap-Up, and Adjourn

Members shared a few additional announcements including East Columbia Basin Irrigation District's celebration of the [OGWRP systems first delivery](#) on May 5, the Columbia River Sustainable Water Coalition [meeting](#) regarding Drought Preparedness Planning for FLAG County Communities on May 15, and the extended deadline to comment on the NW Power & Conservation Council's [Columbia River Fish and Wildlife Program](#).

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 July 31st in Leavenworth, WA. There will be a morning field tour of several Icicle Creek projects followed by a hybrid meeting in the afternoon. More details will be shared in the coming weeks. Rob, Melissa, and Larry expressed gratitude to everyone who attended.

The meeting adjourned at 12:20pm.



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 Duke, Bureau of Reclamation
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
Larry Mattson, OCR/Ecology
Megan Kernan, WDFW
Melissa Downes, OCR/Ecology
Mike Schwisow, Columbia Basin Development
League
Richard Law, City of Moses Lake
Sarah Dyrdaahl, American Rivers

Guests & staff:

Amanda Ward, UCSRB
Ben Floyd, White Buffs Consulting
Ben Lee, Landau Associates
Carl Merkle, CTUIR
Caroline Mellor, Ecology
Christina Frantz, WA DNR
David E. Ortman
Doug Chalmers, SEI
Heather May, Ecology
Jamie Short, Ecology
Jeff Dengel, WDFW
Jordana Ellis, Okanogan CD

Justin Bezold, Trout Unlimited
Kelsey Mach, Aspect Consulting
KC Golden, NW Power and Conservation Council
Kurt Unger, Geosyntec Consulting
Mikahala Waters, Alta Science and Engineering
Rob Diffely
Ryan Niemeyer, UCSRB
Scott Turner, Ecology
Stacy Horton
Stuart Crane, Yakama Nation
Tom Tebb
Ted Knight, Spokane Tribe

Facilitation:

Piper Casey, Ross Strategic
Rob Willis, Ross Strategic