

Palouse Watershed, WRIA 34

This focus sheet provides information on the availability of water for new uses in the Palouse Watershed. This information provides a starting point for potential water users in determining the likelihood of obtaining a new water right for a future project or proposal in this area.

The Palouse Watershed, also known as Water Resource Inventory Area 34 (WRIA 34), is located in eastern Washington and includes the Palouse River and its numerous tributary creeks and streams. The Palouse River originates in the mountains of Idaho. The annual precipitation in the Palouse Watershed ranges from 10 inches per year near its confluence with the Snake River, to 20 inches in the higher elevations along the Idaho border. Only a fraction of this precipitation becomes groundwater available for human and economic uses. Most of the precipitation arrives during the winter months, when water demands are the lowest. During the summer, the snowpack is gone, there is little rain, and naturally low stream flows are dependent on groundwater inflow. This means that groundwater and surface water are least available when water demands are the highest.

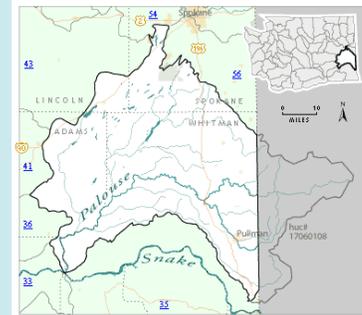
Much of the water in the Palouse Watershed has already been spoken for. Increased demands from population growth, declining groundwater levels, and impacts from climate change are adding to the challenge of finding new water supplies in WRIA 34, especially during the summer months.

Factors affecting water availability

The WRIA 34 planning unit completed recommendations for minimum instream flows, allocation limits, and a reservation for new permit exempt wells for the North Fork Palouse River. The group will also be seeking funds for assessing the instream habitat of additional streams.

The Columbia Basin Project (CBP) is a federally authorized project with multiple purposes: irrigation, power production, flood control, municipal water supply, recreation, and fish and wildlife benefits. The CBP canal system provides water for much of the agricultural irrigation in the region. Water is imported from the Columbia River and is redistributed through canals and stored groundwater. The CBP has three distinct subareas: Quincy, Odessa, and the “508-14.”

MORE INFORMATION



Definitions

Adjudication: A legal process conducted through a superior court to determine the extent and validity of existing water rights.

Consumptive use: A use of water that diminishes the amount of water in the water source.

Instream flows: Flow levels adopted into an administrative rule that create a water right for the stream to protect fish, wildlife, stock watering, recreational uses, and other instream uses and values. Typical instream flow rules now include broader water management strategies.

Mitigation plan: A scientifically-sound plan to offset the impacts of a proposed water use.

Surface water source limitation: A recommendation from the Department of Fish and Wildlife that flows be protected to maintain fish populations. [See RCW 77.57.020](#)

A portion of the Odessa Subarea, established under [WACs 173-128A](#) and [173-130](#), is located within the eastern area of WRIA 34. The majority of this subarea has not been developed with imported water and is often referred to as the second half the CBP. Groundwater levels in the Odessa Subarea aquifer are declining rapidly in many places and as a result, groundwater is not available for new uses.

Adjudications

Cow Creek and Sprague Lake is the only adjudication completed within WRIA 34. In general, most of the water in this adjudicated basin has been allocated and new appropriations are not available.

Groundwater

In general, availability and yield of groundwater from bedrock in this WRIA is very limited by climate and geology. In addition, many areas are in decline, meaning little if any water is available for new consumptive appropriations.

The West Plains is a plateau southwest of the Spokane River, within the northern portion WRIA 34. The Columbia River Basalt Group aquifers underlying the West Plains supply water to the communities of Airway Heights, Medical Lake, Four Lakes, and Fairchild Air Force Base. Groundwater levels have significantly declined in some areas, indicating the groundwater resource is strained. Water in the West Plains is generally considered over-appropriated, that is, no water is available for new consumptive uses.

The sub-basin located around the towns of Pullman and Moscow, Idaho is on the eastern edge of WRIA 34. Groundwater levels have significantly declined in some areas, indicating the groundwater resource is strained. Water in the Pullman-Moscow area is generally considered over-appropriated, that is, no water is available for new consumptive uses.

Surface water

The Palouse watershed has administrative restrictions known as Surface Water Source Limitations (SWSL), which limit most water sources in the watershed. Groundwater connected to the surface sources are also subject to SWSL restrictions. Badger Lake, Cache Creek, Cottonwood Creek, Downing Creek, Four Mile Creek, Imbler Creek, Packer Creek, Palouse River south fork, Palouse River main stem, Paradise Creek, Pine Creek, Rebel Flat Creek, Rock Creek, Thorn Creek and Union Flat Creek are closed from June 15 to September 1. In addition, Silver Lake is closed to new appropriations. This indicates that most water has been appropriated within the watershed.

Water supply available for new uses

The Palouse watershed is not closed to new water uses. However, the majority of water has been appropriated and new uses are subject to the above listed restrictions.

The groundwater permit exemption allows certain users of small quantities of ground water (most commonly, single residential well owners) to construct wells and develop their water supplies without obtaining a water right permit from Ecology. For more information about the groundwater permit exemption, refer to www.ecy.wa.gov/pubs/fwr92104.pdf.

The permit exemption may not be available to prospective water users in certain areas that have been closed to further appropriation because there is limited or no water available. Check with Ecology staff at the regional office for more information.

The Office of Columbia River (OCR) is aggressively pursuing water supply development opportunities throughout the Columbia Basin. You can find additional information at the OCR Web site at: www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/cwp/crwmp.html.

Additional options for finding a water supply include:

- Connecting to an established water supplier. This is the fastest and simplest option.
- Proposing mitigation to offset the impacts to surface water and groundwater.
- Processing a change application with the Whitman County Water Conservancy Board.
- Processing an application through the Cost Reimbursement Program.
www.ecy.wa.gov/pubs/0511016.pdf.

For more information on these and other options, refer to “[Alternatives for Water Right Application Processing](#).”

Pending water right applications in this watershed

Washington water law is based on the “prior appropriation” system, often called “first in time, first in right.” Applications for water from the same source must be processed in the order they are received.

Ecology asks anyone who needs a water right (new, change, or transfer) to submit the pre-application consultation form and meet with us to review your water supply needs and project proposal.

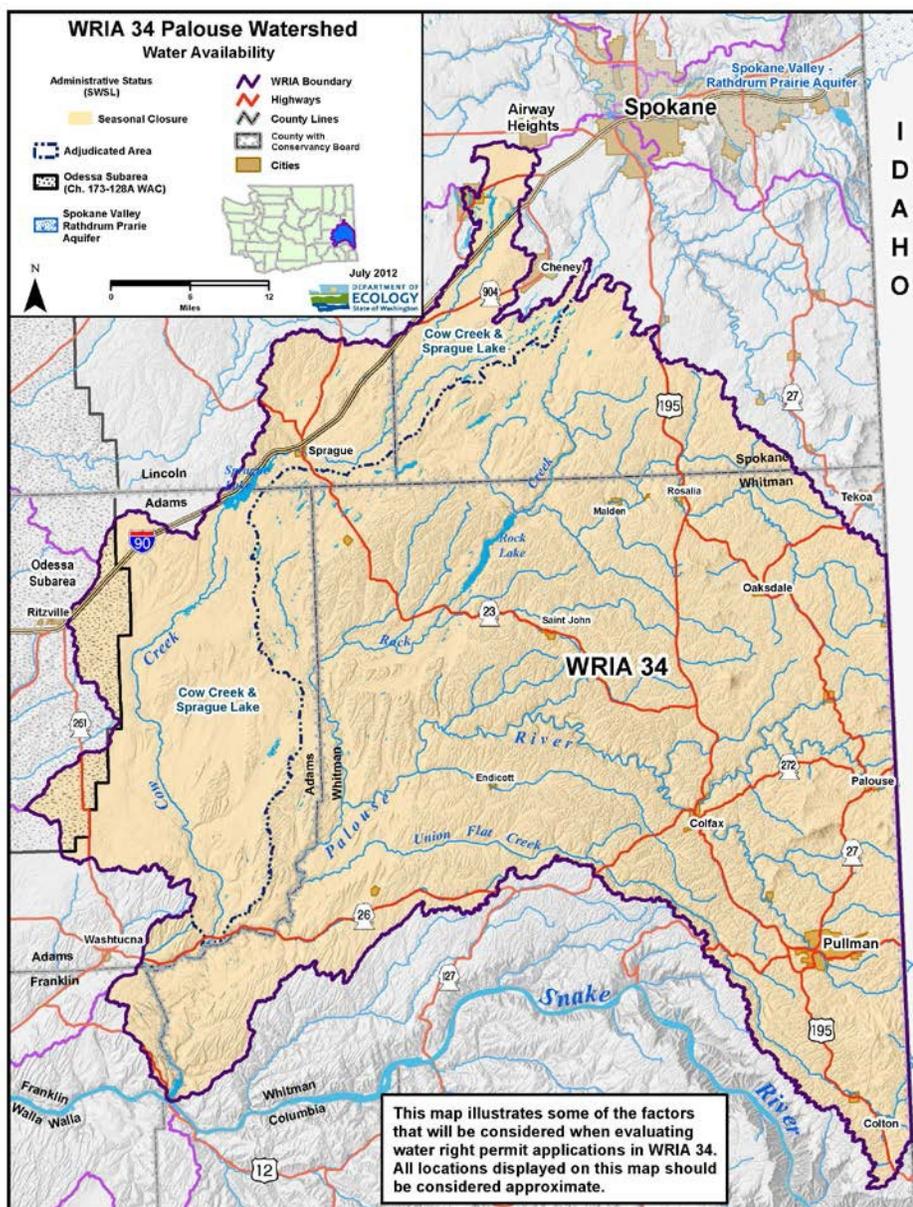
- Apply for a New Water Right
<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/rights/newrights.html>
- Apply to Change or Transfer a Water Right or Claim
http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/rights/change_transfer_use.html

The map in this document shows some of the factors that will be considered when evaluating water right permit applications. Here are some information sources to assist you with your research:

- Locate and research water rights on land parcels anywhere in the state (Water Resource Explorer)
<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/info/webmap.html>
- Pending Water Right Applications by County
<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/rights/tracking-apps.html>
- Subscribe to a water right application RSS feed for a county or WRIA
http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/rights/wr_app_rss.html
- WRIA map showing the total number of water right claims, certificates, permits and applications
<http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/rights/Images/pdf/waterright-wria-maps.pdf>
- Search and view well reports using a variety of search tools
<https://fortress.wa.gov/ecy/waterresources/map/WCLSWebMap/default.aspx>

For more information

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