

Frequently Asked Questions:

S. 1694, the Yakima River Basin Water Enhancement Project Phase III Act of 2015

By Sen. Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.)

What the bill authorizes. This bill authorizes the Initial Phase of the Yakima River Basin Integrated Water Resource Plan (Integrated Plan) to address long-term water supply challenges in the basin. The bill and the Integrated Plan it authorizes are a national model for watershed management. The Integrated Plan was developed through an extraordinary collaboration between state, tribal, and local governments; irrigation districts and agricultural interests; environmental organizations and the federal government. The plan provides for a holistic approach to water management in the basin to ensure the economic vitality and health of the watershed.

S. 1694 authorizes necessary federal participation in the Integrated Plan, by amending existing programmatic legislation for the Yakima River Basin Watershed Enhancement Project enacted in 1979 (YRBWEP I) and 1994 (YRBWEP II). YRBWEP I and II have greatly enhanced water conservation, restoration, and management in the Basin. YRBWEP III builds on these successes and provides for: further improvements in water supply infrastructure, conservation, and ecosystem restoration. Specifically, the bill authorizes federal participation in the following kinds of projects:

- Water Infrastructure Improvements for irrigation and fish benefits –
 - Lake Cle Elum Pool Raise (funded through federal-state cost sharing)
 - Lake Kachess Drought Relief Pumping Plant (funded through private financing)
 - Keechelus to Kachess (K-to-K) Conveyance (funded through private financing)
 - Aquifer storage and recovery studies (funded through federal-state cost sharing)
- Fish Passage Improvements – The bill clarifies authorities needed for construction of fish passage at basin dams, including Cle Elum Reservoir Dam and others (funded through federal-state cost sharing)
- Conservation Improvements for the Yakama Nation – Projects to improve conservation on the Wapato Irrigation Project (increase in the federal cost ceiling for priority conservation enhancement projects)
- Non-Structural Water Conservation, Transfers, and Ecosystem Improvements –
 - Water conservation, transfers, and ecosystem restoration projects
 - Tributary improvement projects (restoration and flow enhancement projects)
 - Flow agreements to improve instream flows and uses

Why the Yakima Basin bill is needed. The basin is likely to face continued water shortages, conflict, and litigation, as there is not enough water to meet current and future demands, especially with projected long-term water conditions.

This year, the Yakima Basin has been facing an unprecedented drought, with low snowpack, reduced run-off, and high heat. Farmers have seen significant crop losses—estimated to reach \$1.2 billion statewide this year. Low streamflows and warm water throughout the basin have also impacted fish such as steelhead, chinook, Coho, and sockeye salmon. Protection of these species is critical to basin communities—and particularly the Yakama Nation. This bill clears the path for the construction of fish passage at dams that have blocked salmon, steelhead, and bull trout migration and spawning habitat for the last century.

Scientific studies of the basin tell us that drought conditions are likely to persist and intensify in the coming years and decades. Low snowpacks and heat are predicted to intensify and are likely to become the new normal. As the Yakima Basin faces continued drought, the federal government has a responsibility to act now to prevent future impacts and costs in meeting its responsibilities in the basin, which include managing extensive Bureau of Reclamation projects, treaty and trust responsibilities to the Yakama Nation, and federal responsibilities in managing public lands and species. Failure to act now could lead to catastrophic economic and environmental impacts in the coming decades. Investing now is critical to avoiding more severe impacts later.

Benefits for the nation. The bill and the Integrated Plan it implements are a model for 21st century watershed management to be replicated in other basins. Among the elements that make this bill an innovative approach is that it:

- Considers human and ecological needs at the watershed scale,
- Embodies collaborative, locally-driven decision-making,
- Provides an adaptive framework to support water resilience now and into the future, and
- Provides for innovative financing that balances federal trust responsibilities with state cost shares and private financing through public-private partnerships.

Benefits for the state of Washington. Nearly every component of the YRBWEP III bill will help farmers, fish, and families in the Yakima Basin. Projects will provide water and drought relief to support the region's \$3.2 billion agricultural economy, while also restoring salmon runs that have been blocked for more than 100 years.

Specifically, projects included in the YRBWEP III bill will:

- Provide drought relief and water security for one of the most productive agricultural regions in Washington;
- Enhance municipal, industrial, domestic, and instream water supplies through improved water conservation, water marketing and transfers, and storage;
- Significantly enhance the environmental health of the Yakima River and its tributaries. Fish passage projects will restore access to the headwaters of the Cle Elum River which have been blocked for more than 100 years and help restore one of the largest sockeye salmon runs in the lower 48. Stream restoration projects will also protect and restore significant spawning habitat for native and anadromous fish and other species.

Why is federal legislation needed? The federal government plays a significant role in the Yakima Basin, including Reclamation's statutory mandate to manage the basin's dams, hydropower facilities, and irrigation infrastructure, and federal legal requirements to manage streamflows for tribal fisheries and other needs. As such, the federal role must be addressed in any proposed solution. Authorization for federal participation is required to carry out projects where there are legal, statutory or programmatic responsibilities.