

Middle Snake River Watershed Watershed Plan Executive Summary

The purpose of watershed planning under the Washington Watershed Management Act (WMA) is to provide a method to help achieve a balance among competing water resource demands. Water demands for commercial, industrial, residential and agricultural activities (e.g. out of stream uses) have to be balanced with Tribal Cultural and instream fish habitat needs. Demands such as irrigated agriculture provide a significant economic base for the Water Resource Inventory Area (WRIA). Critical habitat for fish species listed under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) as well as a diversity of non-listed fish and wildlife are also dependent upon water resources. The WRIA's surface water resources also offer recreational opportunities and natural beauty for residents and visitors.

Watershed Planning Process

The development of a watershed plan is Phase III of voluntary watershed planning under the WMA. WMA identifies a group of "initiating governments" that are empowered to select a lead agency, apply for grant funding, determine the overall scope of planning, and convene a "Planning Unit." The initiating governments include all counties within the WRIA, the government of the largest city or town (if applicable), the water supply utility obtaining the largest quantity of water from the WRIA, and Indian tribes with reservation lands within the management area. Funding is provided through the WMA for areas in Washington State that wish to undertake planning and specifies ground rules for use of the funding.

The WMA identifies the Planning Unit as the group that develops and initially approves the watershed plan. It calls for either a consensus approval by all members of the Planning Unit, or a consensus of the governmental members and a majority vote by remaining members of the Planning Unit. Following approval by the Planning Unit, and a requisite public meeting held by each county legislative authority, the WMA calls for a joint session of the legislative bodies of all counties in the watershed to consider the plan. Once the plan has been approved by both the Planning Unit and joint session of county legislative bodies, it requires counties and State agencies to implement plan elements, which they agreed to be obligated to upon entering the planning process.

Under Phase 1 of the Watershed Planning Process (RCW 90.82), the Planning Unit and Committee Organization for WRIA 35 – Middle Snake River Basin was formed in April 2003.

Watershed Plan

This watershed plan documents the process of using the assessment data gathered during Phase II (Level 1 Watershed Technical Assessment, 2005) to develop objectives and actions for the implementation areas identified within the WRIA. The document is organized as follows:

- Section 1 – Introduction and Background
- Section 2 – Planning Process
- Section 3 – Key Planning Elements by Implementation Area
- Section 4 – General Strategies and Tools
- Section 5 – Basin Wide Management Objectives
- Section 6 – Implementation Area Strategies
- Section 7 – Plan Implementation Considerations

Planning Area Boundaries

The Middle Snake River Watershed (WRIA 35) occupies approximately 2,250 square miles in southeastern Washington along the Idaho border to the east and Oregon border to the south. The Middle Snake Watershed encompasses portions of Whitman and Columbia and all of Asotin, and Garfield Counties within Washington. The Cities of Clarkston, Starbuck, Pomeroy, and Asotin are also located within WRIA 35. The population of the City of Clarkston, and thus its water needs, may be influenced by growth in the neighboring city of Lewiston, Idaho.

Land use is approximately 50 percent rangeland, 33 percent agriculture, 15 percent forestland and 1 percent urban. The population is approximately 25,000. Population growth projections for the area are expected to reach 33,000 by 2020, which is low given the extent of the geographic area, yet nonetheless represents a future need.

Planning Topic Opportunities

During initial planning efforts, the Planning Unit decided to address the required water quantity component of watershed planning along with three of the optional components including instream flow, water quality, and habitat. Despite the limited population, previous studies in the basin have identified both water quantity issues with flow limited streams (e.g. in the Tucannon River and ground water in the Clarkston area), and water quality issues to be of concern in the WRIA. The WRIA 35 planning area includes federally listed Endangered Species, including fall Chinook, spring/summer Chinook, steelhead and bull trout.

Implementation Areas

For the purposes of watershed management, the following five distinct Implementation Areas make up WRIA 35:

- Asotin Creek Implementation Area
- Middle Snake River Implementation Area
- Pataha Creek Implementation Area
- Tucannon River Implementation Area
- Grande Ronde Subbasin Implementation Area

Implementation Areas were formed based on variations in land use, habitat, and hydrologic characteristics within the WRIA.

General Strategies and Tools

Key planning issues for WRIA 35 have been identified in Sections 5 and 6 in the areas of water supply, instream flow, water quality, and aquatic habitat. General strategies or “tool sets” that can be used to address the key planning issues are discussed in Section 4, and specific tools (e.g. programs, projects, BMPs, regulations, etc) are described in detail in Appendix B. A listing of the tools is presented in eight broad categories:

- Water conservation
- Water storage
- Water acquisition and or lease
- Water quality
- Groundwater management
- Groundwater quality
- Regulatory / administrative
- Habitat Enhancement
- Monitoring

The strategies and tools include measures that can be implemented by the Planning Unit, federal, state, and local agencies, tribes, conservation districts, individual landowners, and other stakeholders and water users in addressing key planning issues. The inclusion of a specific strategy or tool herein is not intended as a recommendation for its use within WRIA 35, rather, it is provided here as a menu of some of the possible actions or strategies that are available to address key planning issues within the watershed. This listing of possible tools, while extensive, is by no means exhaustive, and the Planning Unit and other stakeholders may identify and select other means to address the key planning issues discussed within this Plan.

Basin Wide Management Objectives in WRIA 35

Basin-wide management objectives were identified by Planning Unit members through public workshops, in response to various technical assessments and supporting studies, and as additional concepts and/or issues emerged during the planning process. In identifying objectives and actions for the Implementation Areas in WRIA 35, objectives and actions common to most, if not all, of the WRIA were identified. Many of these general objectives and actions have translated into more specific objectives and actions in the Implementation Area action plans, demonstrating how WRIA objectives apply in a specific geographic region.

A full list of objectives is provided in Section 5. A summary of WRIA goals includes:

- Protect existing water rights, private property rights and tribal treaty rights
- Emphasize voluntary and incentive-based management solutions
- Maintain and enhance the regional economy and provide future economic opportunities associated with the watershed hydrology, including but not limited to potable water, agriculture, industry, recreation and tourism
- Establish and maintain ongoing education and public involvement program
- Establish a detailed funding plan for implementation, including: projects, programs, long-term monitoring and evaluation of watershed plan implementation
- Ensure fairness in distributing costs and burdens of water resource management actions
- Obtain local, state and federal agencies (regulatory and management) and tribal buy-in and cooperation for recommended management strategies (Note: This section will be updated when instream flow recommendations are finalized by the Planning Unit)
- Provide long-term reliable and predictable water supplies for human uses
- Identify minimum and target stream flows, and manage stream flows to enhance habitat conditions for salmonids, with emphasis on steelhead, Chinook and bull trout
- Protect surface and ground water quality needed for public drinking water supplies, agriculture, recreation, fish and other uses
- Improve certainty, timeliness and efficiency in water right decisions
- Improve scientific basis for understanding baseline conditions
- Identify and implement water conservation and efficiency strategies
- Maintain productive riparian habitat and enhance degraded habitat for salmonids in all life stages

Implementation Area Strategies

Specific objectives and actions identified for each of the five implementation areas are listed in Section 6. These area-specific objectives and actions are based upon the existing conditions set forth in Section 3, input from the planning workshops, and consideration of WRIA objectives described in Section 5.

Future Plan Updates

The actions recommended in this plan were devised given current understanding of conditions as they exist at the time the plan was developed. Over the next several years, new data will be collected, conditions may change, regulatory and funding programs may change, and new projects affecting water resources may be proposed within the region. In addition, the implementation process may result in some modifications of the recommended actions as they are actually carried out.

To accommodate this ongoing evolution of information and events in the region, it is recommended that the watershed plan be reviewed from time to time to determine whether an update is needed. This review should be carried out by the Planning Unit, as one of its implementation responsibilities. The first review should occur within three years of the date this plan is approved by the Boards of County Commissioners for the Initiating Governments.