



April 28, 2007

Ecology looks to lease, buy water rights to help fish

By DAVID LESTER
YAKIMA HERALD-REPUBLIC

State Ecology officials want to gauge interest from senior water-right holders in leasing or selling their water to improve flows for migrating and spawning fish.

Beginning next year, the agency will launch a program that adds a few new wrinkles to its ongoing effort to purchase water rights.

The program is a reverse auction in which holders of senior rights may offer to sell or lease their rights to the state of Washington. It's designed to help the agency better understand the current value of water rights and the level of interest, officials said.

Bob Barwin of Yakima, who works in policy development for the state Water Resources Program, said the new program has been in development since the 2005 drought.

Launching the program now will have it firmly in place if another drought emergency occurs.

"This is three auctions in one," Barwin said Friday. "We have a long-standing program of buying water rights in the tributaries. Now we have a couple of different types of leases that have good utility for fish restoration and a combination of restoration and dry conditions."

Two fish species are listed as threatened in the Yakima River Basin, steelhead and bull trout.

The lease programs are for years when water supplies are rationed, and what is called a split-season lease that features leasing water after Aug. 1 through the end of the irrigation season.

The drought-year option is designed to be in place before a drought occurs.

"Instead of running a fire drill in March of a drought year, we are trying to line up some agreements in advance and have a portfolio of these actions in place," he said.

The program is funded with \$125,000 from the Bonneville Power Administration and \$500,000 in state water acquisition funds.

Some limits do exist:

- * The water right must have a priority date earlier than May 10, 1905;
- * Minimum terms are five years for the split-season lease and 10 years for the dry-year lease;
- * Bids must be for a minimum of 10 acres.

The 1905 date represents the year the Bureau of Reclamation claimed all water then available to serve the Yakima Irrigation Project.

Information also is available on the Department of Ecology's Web site at www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/wrhome.html.