

# Year One of Columbia River Water Manage

*By Michael Mayer, Legal Director*

**A** year ago, Washington had a breakthrough in water management policy for the Columbia River basin with the passage of legislation to create long-term water policy for the Columbia River. WEC, as part of our ongoing advocacy for protecting rivers and streams across the state, participated in the discussions with state legislators and helped develop the legislation. One year later, it is a good time to assess some of the progress – and frustrations – associated with the implementation of what is now referred to as the Columbia River Basin Water Management Program.

## **Roll On Columbia?**

As many Washingtonians know, the Columbia River is one of the largest rivers in the United States. The Washington portion of the Columbia River basin covers most of the state, encompassing all of the rivers and streams that empty into the Columbia River before it flows into the Pacific Ocean. To give some sense of the river's size, the Snake River – the Columbia's largest tributary – is itself the tenth largest river in the country.

Historically, the Columbia River has been a prolific producer of salmon and steelhead, with annual returns peaking at an estimated 10-16 million fish. Today, however, the health of the Columbia and

lower Snake rivers has been severely compromised. As just one indication, thirteen stocks of salmon and steelhead that rely on the Columbia and Snake rivers are listed under the Endangered Species Act as threatened with extinction.

What the Columbia River has long lacked is an overall plan designed to address those interests based on withdrawing water, such as for irrigation and municipal water supply, while at the same time keeping enough water in the river to protect fish, wildlife, and water quality. The 2006 legislation was intended to identify and fill some of the existing information gaps and help to create the building blocks necessary for sound management of the water in the Columbia River basin.

## **Taking Measure and Investing Resources**

Two key developments are worth noting at the one-year mark. First, the Department of Ecology has made great strides in collecting and organizing information. Ecology has implemented widespread metering of water use; it has mapped where and how water is being used; and it has tied this information to historical water rights information and real-time stream gauges. All of this data is available on a website maintained and updated by Ecology (<https://fortress.wa.gov/ecy/wrx/wrx/columbia/viewer.htm>).



# ment: Tracking Progress

Second, the legislation has provided millions of dollars of funding for projects that will increase the flows in both the Columbia River and its tributaries. Project proposals will undergo review in early 2008 and should provide unprecedented opportunities for adding water to stretches of river that suffer from low flows during the summer and early autumn. WEC will push for those projects that offer real possibilities for salmon restoration.

## Dam-Nation

With climate change and increased population, there are growing pressures across the state to consider new water storage projects to augment increasingly scarce supplies. The Columbia River legislation establishes strict criteria for consideration of all new storage projects, both large and small. New storage could include storing water in underground aquifers or increasing the capacity of existing reservoirs.

Significant attention in recent months, however, has focused on the Department of Ecology's assessment of Crab Creek in Eastern Washington as a potential new dam site. With a construction price tag of anywhere from \$1 billion to \$2.7 billion and with impacts that include the flooding of at least 5,000 acres of private property, roads, rail lines, and thousands of acres of prime fish and wildlife habitat, a dam on Crab Creek would impose a heavy toll, both economically and environmentally. In light of existing information, WEC opposes building a dam on Crab Creek.

Moreover, we are still missing the critical information demanded by the Columbia River bill – information WEC fought for and won as part of the compromise precisely to avoid any rush to judgment about new storage. We do not know how much water is truly needed; we do not know where the need will be greatest; and we do not know the best tools for meeting those needs. Indeed, in many areas we still do not know the amount of water actually being used.

The Department of Ecology has initiated studies to help obtain this information, but those studies are not yet complete. And it is simply not possible to identify the right solutions when the problem is not adequately defined. A combination of water conservation, efficiency improvements, water markets, aquifer storage and recharge, and re-operation of existing dams may very well meet water needs at a much lower economic and environmental cost than destructive and expensive new dams.

## Scouting Ahead

WEC is committed to ensuring that the 2006 legislation benefits the natural resources of the Columbia River basin. WEC will press the state to devote its energies to improving river conditions and gathering information needed for thoughtful decision making. We believe that the 2006 legislation represents a real opportunity to achieve sound long-term water management and hope that we will begin to see tangible results by the time we reach the bill's second anniversary.

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The Columbia River  
*Photo by Antonia Jindrich*

