



Upper Columbia River Group

News Release

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US Bureau of Reclamation tries to preempt Columbia River Treaty renegotiation

New plan would take more water from Columbia River for federally subsidized irrigation

Spokane – Today the Center for Environmental Law & Policy and Sierra Club's Columbia River Future Project criticized the newly released final plan to expand federally-subsidized irrigation in eastern Washington. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Bureau) is the federal author of the Odessa Subarea Special Study, along with the Washington Department of Ecology. The Odessa plan continues a century-long strategy by federal and state governments to take more water from Washington's rivers for irrigated agriculture despite costs to taxpayers, ratepayers, and threatened and destroyed salmon runs.

"Easter Washington's water crisis is bad enough without opening more lands to federal irrigation," said Rachael Paschal Osborn, staff attorney with the Center for Environmental Law & Policy, and volunteer with Sierra Club's Columbia River Future Project.

CELP and Sierra Club's concerns fall into five areas:

- **Where will the water going to come from?** The Bureau and Ecology claim the water for this project will be "skimmed off the top" of Columbia River flows as if it is disconnected from the river ecosystem. The [National Academies of Science](#) concluded that Columbia River is over-allocated and instream flow problems will worsen as the climate warms. More water withdrawals will harm fish, wildlife and water quality, and impact Native American Tribal water rights.
- **A water grab to upstage the Columbia River Treaty renegotiation.** The plan is an effort by the Bureau to divert more water out of the Columbia River even while the United States, Canada, Indian Tribes and First Nations, and others are preparing to re-negotiate the Columbia River Treaty. The Treaty is likely to require deeper reservoir drawdowns starting in 2024 to accommodate spring season floodwaters. Allocating more water out of the Columbia reduces the flexibility of the system to accommodate salmon recovery.

- **Lack of government transparency.** The Bureau's "preferred alternative" is a new alternative and has not been subject to public environmental and economic analysis. The Bureau has excluded the public from review and comment process. This lack of transparency directly contravenes federal law (National Environmental Policy Act).
- **Avoiding disclosure by a piecemeal approach.** By incrementally focusing on one project at a time, the Bureau has for years avoided revealing the full scope and impacts of its intended irrigation expansion plans. Individual projects that collectively comprise the whole include the current proposal along with Potholes Supplemental Feed Route, Weber Siphon (built with federal stimulus monies), and the Lake Roosevelt Drawdown.
- **Who will pay?** The new plan will cost hundreds of millions of dollars, if not more, and will reap the same energy subsidies that make the existing Columbia Basin Irrigation Project a bad deal for taxpayers and ratepayers. These subsidies include below-cost power preferences for irrigators who must move water uphill from Lake Roosevelt, and foregone hydropower revenues for water that will no longer flow through the turbines of Grand Coulee and 10 downstream dams.

Links:

Columbia River Treaty

<http://www.celp.org/water/CRT/home.html>

Odessa Subarea Special Study

<http://www.columbia-institute.org/oss/overview.html>

Economics of Expanding Federal Irrigation to the Odessa Subarea

<http://www.celp.org/water/Legislature-2012/cbp-economics.html>

Will taxpayers be taken for a ride on new state irrigation plans? Daniel Jack Chasan

<http://crosscut.com/2012/02/15/environment/21935/Will-taxpayers-taken-for-ride-on-new-state-irrigat/>

Weber Siphon

<http://www.columbia-institute.org/weber-siphon/cbp/expansion.html>

Lake Roosevelt Drawdown

<http://www.columbia-institute.org/lakeroosevelt/home.html>

Odessa Aquifers: Crisis in Sustainability

<http://columbia-institute.org/oa/odessa/Home.html>