



*Dedicated to protecting and restoring  
America's rivers.*

# Yakima Watershed Initiative

## Balancing Fisheries and Irrigated Agriculture

11/01/02

*American Rivers is working with the Bureau of Reclamation, Yakima irrigation districts, natural resource agencies, and the Yakama Nation to develop a watershed-wide strategy to restore instream flows and water quality*

### **THE YAKIMA RIVER BASIN SHOWCASES EVERY CONCEIVABLE WATER ALLOCATION AND QUALITY CONFLICT**

The Yakima River Basin once produced between 600,000-900,000 salmon and steelhead, but the fishery has been reduced to one percent of its historic abundance due to altered river flows and water pollution.

The river is largely controlled by the Bureau of Reclamation, which operates a multi-dam water storage and delivery project in the Yakima for the benefit of irrigation agriculture. As a result, stream flows are seasonally either too high or too low to support the life cycle needs of anadromous fish. Three hydroelectric projects also degrade salmon habitat. Yakima steelhead and bull trout are listed under the Endangered Species Act, and much of the river violates water quality standards for a host of pesticides and other pollutants, temperature, and low flows. The Yakima has among the highest levels of DDT in the nation because tons of pesticide-laden sediment are discharged from irrigation canals into the river. The basin is in the midst of a water rights adjudication that began in 1977.

### **AMERICAN RIVERS IS WORKING TO RESTORE FLOWS AND WATER QUALITY IN THE YAKIMA BASIN**

In 1994, federal legislation – the Yakima River Basin Water Enhancement Project – authorized federal financing of water conservation measures and other changes in Bureau of Reclamation project works and operations to improve stream flows for salmon, and to stabilize agricultural water supplies. American Rivers is engaged on several fronts to improve flows and water quality in the Yakima Basin.

#### **Yakima River Basin Conservation Advisory Group**

Outmoded on-farm and irrigation district practices are responsible for serious water quality as well as flow problems in the Yakima River. As the environmental representative to the Secretary of Interior's Yakima River Basin Conservation Advisory Group (the "CAG"), a consensus-based group that includes the

- The Yakima River Basin is a classic example of the ill effects of water storage projects and excessive water withdrawals on river ecosystems and aquatic organisms
- Scientists agree that recovery of Yakima River salmon and steelhead is central to their recovery in the Columbia Basin as a whole



irrigation community, American Rivers is working to ensure that federal funds support water acquisition and other measures to put water back in the Yakima River to help restore salmon runs and water quality. American Rivers advocated the adoption of tiered water pricing and other management approaches that encourage water conservation, which in turn will improve water quality and river flows. American Rivers is also responsible for expanding funding sources for water and riparian land acquisition ten-fold under the Enhancement Act. These policies are now part of the Yakima Basin Conservation Plan, the first product of the CAG. The CAG also adopted American Rivers' recommendations for universal water metering, stream masters and an enforcement strategy that makes the cost of not complying with water permits significantly greater than the cost of compliance. CAG is currently working on a pilot water transfer process, the first year of which (2001 irrigation season) resulted in the transfer of 23,000 AF of consumptive rights and additional 40,000 AF of conveyance water. The first year of the pilot was an overwhelming success.

### **The Biologically-Based Flow Study**

American Rivers has stressed that biological, not political, science should be the basis for determining instream flow targets in the basin. We are responsible for a provision of the Yakima River Basin Water Enhancement Project legislation that requires basin biologists to report to Congress on what is necessary to establish *biologically*-based flows for the river. We successfully encouraged the biological team to move away from outmoded flow models to an ecosystem approach that will ensure flows for river channel maintenance and restoration of floodplains and riverside vegetation. Without such an approach, the chances for recovery and long-term survival of salmon and other aquatic communities are slim.

### **New Operating Plan for the Bureau of Reclamation's Yakima Project**

The Enhancement legislation directs the Bureau of Reclamation to develop an operating plan that takes into consideration the work on biologically-based flows and the Basin Conservation Plan, as well as existing irrigation delivery contracts. This will be a first for the Yakima Project – an operating plan that formally takes into account the needs of the fishery as well as the needs of irrigators. On our recommendation, the Bureau agreed to form an operating plan advisory group composed of representatives from fishery agencies, environmental groups, tribes, and irrigators. The advisory group has hammered out recommendations for changes in project operations to restore river flows, riparian and floodplain habitat, and otherwise improve fish and wildlife habitat in the basin.

### **The Water Rights Adjudication and Hydropower Operations in the Yakima Basin**

Existing water rights are preserved by the recent federal legislation; as a consequence, the amount of those rights is critical to what water will be made available to recover the fishery and for water quality improvements. In cooperation with and at the request of the State of Washington, American Rivers convinced the Washington Supreme Court to upset the legal foundation established by the adjudication court when it awarded what we viewed as excessive amounts of water to irrigation districts that receive water from the Bureau of Reclamation based on Bureau contracts rather than beneficial use and the doctrine of relinquishment.

American Rivers is also working to ensure that adequate flows are maintained in the river reaches affected by three hydroelectric projects in the basin. We recently convinced the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission that the Naches and Yakima rivers are navigable under federal law and that a hydropower facility operated by PacifiCorp on the Naches river, the Yakima's largest tributary, must be licensed. The company decided to transfer ownership of the facility to the Bureau of Reclamation, which will decommission the facility and return water diverted for hydropower to the river to restore salmon runs and river functioning.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:**

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