

Q-A on water storage opportunities, March 2010

What is the PUD doing?

Washington State Department of Ecology (Ecology) is looking for additional water sources to help natural resources (such as fish) and also to help citizens who need more water rights. Ecology has shown strong interest in having Chelan County PUD study various proposals, and the PUD has agreed to take the first steps toward evaluating possibilities. Ecology will pay for the studies. Increasing the storage behind Rocky Reach Dam is one potential way to store and provide additional water for fish and people. Another way might be to pump water from the Columbia River during high flows and store it in new holding areas (reservoirs) until it would be returned back into the river when needed (a concept known as pumped storage).

Why is this happening?

Ecology has been directed by the state Legislature to find additional water for in-stream and out-of-stream uses. Ecology has money to pay for studies to find suitable projects and is working with Chelan PUD and other entities on similar efforts. Chelan PUD believes there may be benefits for local residents and our customer-owners if more water is available but realizes much more evaluation is needed before proceeding with any specific project.

Hasn't Chelan PUD tried this before? What's different now?

Yes, Chelan PUD applied to raise the reservoir level behind Rocky Reach Dam in the early 1990s. Federal regulators denied the application due to potential impacts to fish. At that time there was no way to measure impacts accurately. Now there are new ways to measure impacts with improved fish tagging and better technology, and the PUD has agreements that protect fish and ensure that survival standards are met if river operations change.

How long will this take?

This will be a long process that could take five to 10 years before any project would be completed. We are at the very beginning. Chelan PUD has identified issues related to rare and threatened plant species that must be considered. There will be many opportunities for public comment and involvement throughout the long process as it moves forward. PUD commissioners have approved agreements with Ecology to pay for early studies.

What are the next steps?

The PUD hired a consultant (with Ecology funds) to study Ute Ladies' Tresses, a rare and threatened plant that grows along the Rocky Reach reservoir. Moving forward will depend partly on potential protection, mitigation and enhancement options related to the plant. A consultant may be hired in coming months (with Ecology funds) to help identify additional internal and external points to consider and look at how the application process for a license amendment might work. The PUD has also hired a consultant (again with Ecology funds) to take an early look at possible pumped-storage sites.

What are the benefits?

More water rights may be available for local residents if there is more water stored in the Columbia River. More flows for fish may be available during the summer. Additional clean hydropower may be produced that would meet growing demand for renewable energy throughout the region. If more surplus power is available, the PUD may be able to use revenues from sale of that power to help hold down rates.

What will this cost?

There are no cost estimates because it is so early in the process. Any studies the PUD does will be paid for with state funds through Ecology. If a project is developed and it proves to be financially beneficial to the PUD, the PUD is prepared to pay Ecology back for its initial investment.

What might happen to property along the Rocky Reach shoreline?

There is no specific proposal at this point so nothing would change in the near future. If additional water storage is proposed and ultimately approved by all the state and federal agencies who would help review it for potential impacts, water levels at Rocky Reach Dam could rise by 1 to 3 feet for most of the year. Water would be withdrawn from the reservoir behind Rocky Reach Dam during the late summer and fall. The PUD has flowage rights for those levels around much of the reservoir, and it would have to secure remaining rights before it could proceed. Anyone needing to know the status of property should contact the PUD's Real Estate Services Division, 661-4244.

Where can people get additional information?

Additional information is available on the PUD Web site, www.chelanpud.org. People can also call Kris Pomianek at 661-4186. Kris is available to talk with property owners and can try to answer questions based on the limited information we know at this time.