

2019 ISSUE PAPER: WATER

Position statement

The League of Women Voters of Washington supports the “establishment and maintenance of minimum in-stream flows, as a public right.” The LWVUS supports policies that “reflect the interrelationships of water quality and quantity, groundwater and surface water and address the potential depletion or pollution of water supplies; and policies to achieve water quality essential for maintaining species populations and diversity, including measures to protect lakes, estuaries, wetlands and in-stream flows.”

Washington State manages water resources for the people of the state under federal and state regulations and guidelines such as the Clean Water Act, Safe Drinking Water Act, Water Resource Act and Shoreline Act. Water is allocated for use through water rights based on Western Water law on a priority basis of first in time first in right. The 1971 Washington Water Resource Act was an important milestone in the management and stewardship of this public resource. The Water Resource Act states, “Proper utilization of the water resources of this state is necessary to the promotion of public health and the economic well-being of the state and the preservation of its natural resources and aesthetic values”. It further acknowledges the increased competition for use of this limited resource and the importance of preserving in-stream resources. The LWVWA has been a strong proponent of water policy that supports the principles of the Water Resource Act and has lobbied to prevent legislative attempts to weaken this guiding policy for responsible stewardship of our precious water resource.

In the 2018 session, bills were passed to begin restoring instream flows and aquifers, and to reduce water contamination from PFAS chemicals. We will continue efforts to ensure progress is monitored and adjustments made to regulations as needed. As research continues, we expect to see more interest in limiting consequential contaminating chemicals. The Legislature’s response to the Hirst decision is the Stream Flow Restoration Law (WRC 90-94). Restoration project proposals are now coming in to the Department of Ecology, and we will monitor this process.

Summary of Issues for the 2019 Legislative Session

Legislators introduced bills during the past two sessions, many of which did not make it out of committee due to more pressing priorities including: regulating suction dredge mining in streams to protect fish habitat and spawning areas, reducing alloyed lead in water fixtures, increasing appliance efficiencies, and encouraging water conservation through runoff control such as rain gardens. The Department of Ecology will be asking for more funding to respond to recent laws, assess water issues, adjudicate water rights, and enhance drought preparedness.

Continuing concerns requiring action sooner or later include: contaminants entering our water supplies (streams and aquifers) from point and non-point sources (seepage and runoff of chemicals, plastics, oil and debris from our streets and highways, failing septic systems, etc.). Waste water treatment continues increasing the quality of the effluent so some is available for reuse, but we must ensure it is pure enough to not contribute to pollution buildup in the long run. Any pollutants in our freshwater sources eventually flow into the Columbia River and into Puget Sound, so will affect the quality of those bodies. Our top marine predator, the Orca whale, is now under severe stress due partly to pollutant accumulation and the related demise of Chinook salmon prey.

Continued population growth and development will escalate stress on our state water supply. The effects of climate change will exacerbate the imbalance of water supply-and-demand from winter to summer. Sensible management of our water sources is required to ensure all needs are met and none is wasted. The best solutions will address long term benefits over short-term economics.

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