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Tribe vetoes Deschutes plan

Squaxin say water proposal does too little

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A five-year, \$360,000 effort to craft a water-resources management plan for the Deschutes River watershed has been scrapped.

The Squaxin Island tribe has vetoed the plan, saying the 150-page document perpetuated business as usual in the water-planning arena when wholesale changes are needed.

Fourteen other members of the committee working on the plan have endorsed it. The plan called for better enforcement of water rights, increased stream monitoring, stronger reviews of proposed small community wells and a greater emphasis on water conservation.

"I'm very disappointed," said Virgil Clarkson, Lacey mayor and chair of the committee. "I think it's a waste of energy and a waste of funds. In my opinion, we produced a fairly good document."

The Deschutes watershed is home to 144,000 people, a population expected to grow to 223,000 by 2025 and eventually 300,000 under current zoning.

The stated goal of the plan is to manage water wisely for both human needs and stream flows that support salmon and critical habitat. But to turn the plan into action required unanimous support of all the governments.

The plan was funded by the state Department of Ecology and was a by-product of a 1998 state law that called for water resource planning in 62 watersheds around the state, involving local governments, tribes, builders, shellfish growers, farmers and other interest groups.

The tribe opposed the original bill and warned participants from the start that it was a flawed process, tribal policy analyst Jeff Dickison said.

"The tribe believes the owners of the water should be making the decisions, and they are the state, the tribes and the federal government," he said. "This plan is business as usual, with a little bit of tweaking. The system is not working and needs to be changed."

For instance, he said, the tribe's position is that any future water withdrawals in the 270-square-mile watershed that runs down the center of Thurston County should be offset by an equal amount of water conservation or water reuse.

Many of the 256 miles of streams in the watershed depend on groundwater for their summertime flows. One of the challenges is withdrawing groundwater without depriving the Deschutes River and its tributaries of water.

In 1980, the state halted any new withdrawals of water from the river and streams in the watershed. All new water withdrawals are from underground supplies called aquifers.

In some areas of the watershed, groundwater withdrawals are lowering stream flows, Squaxin Island tribe vice chair Andy Whitener said in a letter Friday to the committee, announcing the tribe's final decision to terminate the plan.

"The concept has merit, but we don't have the data to support the tribe's claim," said Tom Clingman, a Thurston County water resources specialist.

On the other hand, the monitoring data don't show a reduction in the amount of water in the aquifers, which is where water is pulled from to support population growth and development, Clingman said.

An estimated 21.65 million gallons of water is used daily in the watershed, which includes Tumwater, Olympia and much of Lacey.

So what happens next?

The tribe is willing to work with local governments on water resource management, if those governments are prepared to make wholesale changes, Dickison said. If they go it alone or try to adopt portions of the plan in other ways, they run the risk of a lawsuit.

All of the hours of planning weren't for naught, said Jim Bachmeier, county water resource program manager.

"We're walking away with new scientific information and a broader knowledge of water supplies and future demographic trends," Bachmeier said. "We're disappointed that the plan wasn't approved, but the research and dialogue that went into it are invaluable."

Other participants are less upbeat.

"The committee worked long and hard with a fair degree of consensus," said Doug DeForest, executive director of the Olympia Master Builders and a committee member. "We took significant steps in improving water management in the basin -- that whole effort is down the tubes."

Clarkson said derailment of the plan could slow down work by the cities on developing joint water supplies.

"I still want to work with the tribe," Clarkson said. "They objected to the law, but we had a mandate from the Legislature and had to work with it."

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Rejecting the plan

Here are some of the key reasons the Squaxin Island tribe vetoed the Deschutes River watershed plan:

- The tribe wants water resources managed on a government-to-government basis. The state watershed planning act approved by the state Legislature in 1998 gave other groups -- including private water utilities, developers, environmental groups and agricultural interests -- a place at the table.
- Planning didn't start from the premise that there is a shortage of water in the watershed, a position the tribe holds.
- The tribe contends that any new use of water needs to be balanced with conservation and reuse. The plan does not rule out drilling more wells, but calls for mitigation plans to reduce the impact of new withdrawals.
- The tribe wants all water withdrawals to be monitored and regulated. The plan follows state law, allowing single-family wells in the rural area of the watershed to be exempt from detailed review of their possible impacts on stream flows.

Seeing the plan

To view a draft of the plan, go to www.co.thurston.wa.us/wwm and click on "WRIA 13."

The Deschutes Watershed is home to three of the 30 special places submitted by Olympian readers.