

Tapps plan tries to suit fish, cities, water skiers

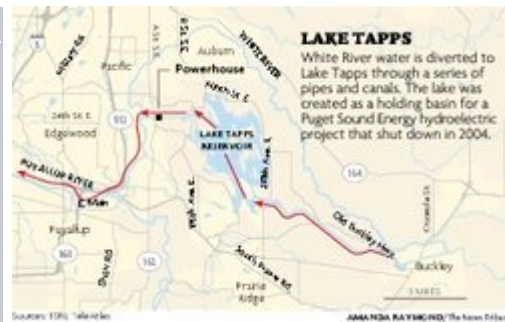
SUSAN GORDON; The News Tribune

Published:

September 26, 2006

Sharing the waters of the White River isn't going to be easy, judging by reaction to the latest regulatory move to save Lake Tapps.

On Monday, the state Department of Ecology rolled out a revamped water-right proposal for the lake and its source, the White River. The public has 45 days to comment.



The proposal, in theory, would permit Puget Sound Energy to draw enough water from the river to supply a city of 500,000 people while storing enough in the lake for water skiing in summer.

At the same time, the proposed permit would maintain sufficient flow to sustain White River fish, state Department of Ecology officials said.

Puget Sound Energy hopes to win approval of the water right so it can then sell it to an alliance of King County water customers.

"These water right decisions, when finalized, will be a rare and creative example of how to create a very large regional water supply and simultaneously enhance environmental conditions," said Jay Manning, Ecology Department director.

But the reaction was mixed Monday among the people with stakes in how the water is used.

"Whether it's going to work or not is still an open question," said Auburn Mayor Pete Lewis, whose city is looking for ways to expand its water supply.

This is the second time the Ecology Department has issued a water right for the White River and Lake Tapps since Puget Sound Energy announced in 2004 it would shut down its hydroelectric plant. The 4-mile-long lake was created almost 100 years ago as a reservoir for the power plant.

The state Pollution Control Hearings Board ordered a rewrite of the first permit in response to appeals from the Puyallup and Muckleshoot Indian tribes and the cities of Buckley and Auburn, among others.

The tribes complained the permit would take water from fish. The cities – all within White River watershed – said it would rob them of water needed locally.

Tom Loranger, the Ecology Department's southwest regional water resource manager, said both boaters and fish should benefit from the revamped permit.

The White River is home to the Puget Sound's last run of spring chinook salmon, which are protected under the Endangered Species Act. Federal agencies that regulate endangered fish have not yet reviewed the plan.

"If we get suggestions to make it better, we're telling people we'll be all ears," Loranger said.

Pierce County Councilman Shawn Bunney, who serves as co-chairman of the Lake Tapps Task Force, said he is optimistic the permit will provide drinking water to Pierce County users as well as the current King County customers of the Cascade Water Alliance.

The alliance represents about 300,000 customers in cities mostly east of Seattle and is seeking to expand, general manager Mike Gagliardo said.

In 2005, Puget Sound Energy announced a tentative agreement to sell the lake and its piping systems to the alliance for between \$10 and \$37 million.

Leon Stucki, a Snag Island resident and vice president of the Lake Tapps Community Council, said Monday he's not satisfied Ecology Department officials have proved their case.

As he sees it, the guarantees of minimum flows for fish in the river probably will mean too little water in Lake Tapps for skiing in late summer.

And Buckley City Administrator Dave Schmidt, whose community also needs an additional source of water, said he will ask the city's lawyer to look over Ecology's latest proposal.

Before Puget Sound Energy decided to sell water from Lake Tapps, the White River watershed was closed to new water right applications, Schmidt said.

"If it's closed to us, it should be closed to everyone," he said.

On the net

To view the Lake Tapps water-right proposal and submit comments to the Department of Ecology, go to www.ecy.wa.gov and follow the link to "Water Resources."