



Office of the
Washington
State Auditor
Pat McCarthy

PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Report Highlights

Assessing Success of the Walla Walla Watershed Management Partnership Pilot

The Walla Walla watershed supports critical farming, endangered species habitat and tourism in both Washington and Oregon, yet more people have legal rights to the water than actual water exists. In the early 2000s, faced with legal issues from federal regulators concerning endangered fish, people in Washington began working together on water conservation, leading to the development of a new management model. Created in 2009, the Walla Walla Watershed Management Partnership pilot allowed management of the Washington side of the watershed through a locally-focused, collaborative approach, without the Department of Ecology's usual regulatory oversight.

The pilot was originally scheduled to sunset in 2019; however, the Legislature extended it to 2021 to allow for financial and performance audits, and to allow participants to determine how best to manage water in the region going forward. This performance audit was designed to assess the success of the water management pilot's efforts over its 10-year tenure.

The Partnership did not explicitly identify improving streamflow as a core strategic goal and lacked an accountability framework that would have allowed it to evaluate and adapt its strategies

The Legislature created the pilot expressly to improve streamflow. However, when the Partnership's board wrote its initial strategic plan, streamflow was only cited in connection one of its objectives—establishing local water plans. In its 2018 report to the Legislature, the Partnership acknowledged streamflow did not improve. Our own statistical analysis also suggests it did not change.

While the Partnership complied with most aspects of the law which addressed creating and running the pilot, it did not develop an accountability framework to use data, performance measures and targets to understand and respond to its challenges. Performance measures were required by the Legislature to be included in approved local water plans, but none were. Without metrics related to streamflow, the Partnership was unable to assess the success of its strategies.



A solar-powered stream gauge measures water levels near Gardena, Washington

Photo: State Auditor's Office.

Insufficient funds, seen as a barrier to the Partnership's success, might be remedied by returning watershed management to Ecology

Board members cited the lack of funding as a primary barrier to the Partnership's success. However, the Partnership did not fully use its authority to raise funds through fees and grant applications. As a consequence, it lacked sufficient staffing to acquire sufficient grants and was unable to pay for key streamflow enhancement strategies. The watershed needs infrastructure improvements that Ecology, with its access to greater financial resources, could more easily support. Members of the Partnership Board could continue as members of an advisory board, following Ecology's model in the Yakima watershed.

Significant streamflow improvements in this watershed require greater state-level cooperation between Washington and Oregon

The volume of water in the Walla Walla River on Washington's side depends largely on the amount of water that crosses the state line from the river's source in Oregon. Oregon is not required to send any minimum amount of water across the state line. Oregon and Washington currently lack a formal agreement to collaborate in the Walla Walla watershed, but an interstate compact could help them work together to improve and protect streamflow.

State Auditor's Conclusions

For years, the Walla Walla watershed has not had enough water to support local residents and the region's fishing, farming and tourism industries. In 2009, the Legislature created the Walla Walla Watershed Management Partnership as a pilot program to see if cooperative local management could solve the problem and increase the amount of water in the river to the benefit of all who depend on it. While the Partnership may have had some benefits, including bringing diverse interests together for a common goal, after 10 years it is clear that the Partnership has not affected streamflow as intended.

At this point, it makes the most sense to return the responsibility for water management in the Walla Walla watershed to the Department of Ecology while maintaining the benefits of the Partnership in the form of an advisory board that includes current membership. Ecology could then follow a watershed management model similar to that employed in the Yakima watershed, where streamflow has measurably improved.

Perhaps most importantly, because water supply in the Walla Walla watershed is so dependent on actions taken upstream in Oregon, any real solution to streamflow will have to involve cooperation across state lines. For that reason, we recommend the Governor open discussion with state leadership in Oregon to form an interstate compact that can address water management in the watershed.

Additional recommendations

We made a series of recommendations to the Legislature and the Governor to address the future of the water management pilot in Walla Walla, and to help ensure adequate available water for the region's future. In addition to the recommendations noted above, we recommend the board members work with Ecology to finalize a long-term plan for the region.



Low water in July on the Walla Walla River at Pepper Bridge

Photo: State Auditor's Office