



2021 Issue Paper: Water

Position Statement

The LWV of Washington, as stated in the [Program in Action 2019-2021](#) believes that “minimum stream flows should be established as a public right and maintained on all streams” (CR-3). The LWV of the United States [Impact on Issues 2018-2020](#) supports policies that “reflect the interrelationships of water quality, water quantity, ground water, and surface water and that 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 under federal and state regulations and guidelines such as the Clean Water Act, Safe Drinking Water Act, Water Resources Act, and the Shoreline Management 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 [Water Resources Act](#) of 1971, an important milestone, 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.” The LWVWA has been a strong proponent of water policy that supports the principles of the Water Resources Act and has lobbied to prevent legislative attempts to weaken this act.

The state Department of Ecology continues to approve grants for restoration project proposals under the Streamflow Restoration law (RCW 90.94). Ensuring recovery of in-stream flows for fish habitat and recreation, and aquifers for irrigation and drinking water, will require continued attention. The current status is located on the [Department of Ecology website](#).

In 2019, the legislature passed bills to encourage voluntary cleanup projects, to identify and regulate toxic pollution that affects public health or the environment, and to prohibit hydraulic fracking, which consumes and can pollute freshwater. These actions moved the outlook for water purity in a positive direction. Also passed was SB 5352, extending the Walla Walla watershed management pilot program to increase streamflows in that basin.

As many communities across the nation have discovered, we must be vigilant in maintaining water purity and ensure our government representatives are applying due attention to addressing current challenges and preventing future ones. With increasing population and the effects of climate change, our supplies of freshwater are under stress. This will remain a challenge for the state and we must take actions that prevent conditions from becoming a crisis.

Summary of Issues for the 2021 Legislative Session

Abundant and pure water assures healthy people and wildlife, safe recreation, and productive agriculture. Continuing concerns should be addressed sooner rather than later including:

- Contaminants entering our water supplies (streams and aquifers) from point and nonpoint sources (seepage and chemical runoffs, plastics, oil and debris from our streets and highways, failing septic systems, and more).
- Wastewater treatment and use. The quality of the effluent continues to increase so some is available for reuse, but we must ensure it is pure enough to avoid contributing to contamination buildup in the long run.
- 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.

Several bills addressing those imperatives were introduced last session, and we will encourage the legislature to take them up again.

- Supporting low-water landscaping practices as a drought alleviation tool and preventing local rules from discouraging such practices.
- Improving the testing of drinking water for emerging contaminants. Many pollutants surfacing as health threats are not tested for in Washington public water supplies. We should use the best science to prioritize the most serious contaminants and create rules for testing.
- Developing and coordinating a statewide “don't drip and drive” program to reduce nonpoint runoff from vehicle fluid leaks. We already have this on the west side of the state.
- Reducing lead in drinking water in schools. No amount of lead contamination is safe, especially for children, and our schools should have the purest water available. Testing and infrastructure correction is required.
- Several bills reducing single-use plastics are significant for water quality because waste management escapes can degrade our water environment for recreation and wildlife health.

Population growth and development will escalate demands on our water supply. The effects of climate change will exacerbate the imbalance of water availability from winter to summer. Sensible management of our water sources is required to ensure all needs are met and no water is squandered or misused. The best solutions will prioritize long-term benefits over short-term profit. Climate change and the health of our rivers and shorelines are covered in companion LWVWA issue papers.

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