

## **Drops of Water Article August 2002** **Cooperative Efforts in the Chehalis River Basin**

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Since our elected state officials enacted legislation to allow local processes to develop that could manage the water resources and recover salmon through cooperative processes, many stakeholders within the Chehalis River Basin (Basin) tested the waters by joining forces. The preceding summarizes the efforts that Grays Harbor County coordinates in the Basin on behalf of the Chehalis Basin Partnership (Partnership). The Basin stretches from Grays Harbor up past Oakville and Grand Mound to include land beyond Centralia and Napavine. The Basin is bound on the west by the Pacific Ocean, on the east by the Deschutes River Basin in Thurston County, on the north by the Olympic Mountains in Jefferson County, and on the south by the Willapa Hills and the Cowlitz River Basin.

At the end of 1999, Grays Harbor County undertook the role as the Lead Agency for Watershed Planning and the Lead Entity for Salmon Recovery in the Basin. The decision to undertake the colossal task was not taken lightly. After reviewing the intent of the legislation, which included statements that the processes must include opportunities for local citizens to provide input and be engaged in the selection of projects, Grays Harbor County accepted the role. According to County Commissioner Bob Beerbower, "Water resource planning in the Chehalis Basin is a great way for folks to learn about issues that affect them every day, and it provides an opportunity for the citizenry to provide valuable input into the decision making process."

### **Water Resources Planning (Chapter 90.82 RCW)**

Funding for this process is available through a Washington State law passed in 1998 known as the Watershed Planning Act (Chapter 90.82 RCW). Under this law, the planning group – the Partnership in this case – must agree in Phase I (Initiating Planning and Getting Organized) on the elements that will be considered in a Watershed Management Plan. The planning group is required to assess water quantity, and has the option of including water quality, habitat of endangered or threatened fish, and instream flow levels. Of these, the Partnership decided to study and make recommendations on water quality and habitat along with water quantity – although study of instream flow levels is being done for some tributaries of the Chehalis River (Skookumchuck, Black, Satsop, Hoquiam, Humptulips, and Upper Chehalis Rivers). The information from these studies will help determine if the existing minimum flow levels, set in 1976, limit fish production or are higher than they need to be.

An inter-local agreement was developed to form and govern the proceedings of the Partnership. The partners to this original agreement include: Grays Harbor County, Lewis County, Mason County, Thurston County, Confederated Tribes of the Chehalis, City of Aberdeen, City of Centralia, City of Chehalis, City of Napavine, City of Ocean Shores, City of Pe Ell, Port of Centralia, Department of Ecology, Boistfort Valley Water Company, and Grays Harbor Water District #2. Since its formation, many other stakeholders, both public and private, have joined forces with the Partnership.

The law requires that each county with land in the river basin participate, along with the largest city or town, and the largest water provider. The law also requires that all tribes with reservation land within the study area be asked to participate in the process. In the Chehalis Basin, both of the Tribes with reservation land, the Quinault Tribe and the Confederated Tribes of the Chehalis, agreed to participate. These entities are called the "Initiating Governments," and they invite all other interested parties to participate.

The goal is to meet the needs of the Chehalis Basin by balancing the needs of humans and the needs of the environment, focusing on water quantity, water quality, and fish habitat. The Partnership has adopted the mission/goal statement of developing "a water management plan that will eventually result

in effective, economical and equitable management of the water in the Chehalis Basin to sustain viable and healthy communities and habitat conditions necessary for native fish.”

The Partnership is currently moving from Phase 2 (Process of Conducting Technical Assessments) to Phase 3 (Watershed Management Plan) of the above process, having reached consensus on technical studies to fill data gaps and on an outline for the Watershed Management Plan, which must be completed by October 2003.

It will be a difficult job to balance all the needs of water users throughout the large Basin, a reason citizen involvement is necessary to ensure that the Plan reflects the needs of all affected communities. The Chehalis Basin Partnership welcomes interested citizens to attend its meetings.

### **Salmon Recovery (Chapter 77.85 RCW)**

Funding for this process is available through a Washington State law passed in 1998 known as the Salmon Recovery Act (Chapter 77.85 RCW). A major premise in the 1998 Salmon Recovery Act was to retain responsibility for managing Washington's natural resources rather than abdicate those responsibilities to the federal government. Thus, in the Salmon Recovery Act, the Legislature created what has become known as the Lead Entity Program in the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WFDW).

For the Basin, Grays Harbor County accepted the role as Lead Entity. Lead Entities are organizations that function to solicit, develop, prioritize, and submit habitat protection and restoration projects for funding to the Salmon Recovery Funding Board (SRFB). Lead Entity boundaries typically coincide with complete or partial Water Resource Inventory Areas (WRIAs), WRIA's 22 and 23 in the case of the Chehalis. They consist of a coordinator (Lee Napier), a committee of local technical personnel (Technical Advisory Group or TAG), and a committee of local citizens (Partnership). The TAG assisted in the development of the *Salmon and Steelhead Habitat Limiting Factors Analysis for the Chehalis Basin*, the *Chehalis Basin Plan for Habitat Restoration*, and the identification and prioritization of projects. The Partnership citizen committee is responsible for developing the final prioritized project list. The Lead Entity submits the list of prioritized projects to the SRFB for funding consideration.

Project development for the SRFB Fourth Round Grant Cycle is already underway in the Basin. For more information regarding project development and/or funding opportunities, please contact Lee Napier @ 1.800.230.1638.

All citizens are encouraged to get involved in one or both of the processes. Your participation does make a difference. "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." —**Margaret Mead**