# Drought in the Yakima River Basin

## Frequently Asked Questions

1. **How can we still be in drought after so much rain and flooding in December 2025?**
   Back-to-back atmospheric rivers that struck Washington and the Yakima basin last year brought record-breaking precipitation. This provided a tremendous boost to water storage in the five major reservoirs in the upper Yakima basin, which had been depleted after three consecutive years of drought. High reservoirs at the start of the season are very helpful, but they do not provide enough water to last the whole year.

   Historically, basin water supplies have also depended on winter snowpack in the Central Cascades that slowly melts over the spring. This natural storage – known as "snow water equivalent" – contains more water than all five reservoirs combined and is often referred to as the basin's "sixth reservoir." Mountain snowpack is very low this year, and the spring and summer are forecast to be hot and dry, leading to a fourth consecutive year of drought. There will not be enough water to meet all demands.

2. **Who decides when we are in an official drought?**
   The Washington Department of Ecology announces when the Governor of the State of Washington has declared a drought. A drought is declared when: 1. A specific area of the state experiences, or is forecasted to have, less than 75% of its normal water supply; and 2. This shortage is expected to cause undue hardship to water users, agriculture, or the environment. This year, every watershed in Washington has met these thresholds, leading Ecology to extend a drought declaration statewide, and across the Yakima basin for a fourth consecutive year. Drought has always been a reality in the basin. However, dry periods with less snowpack are expected to become longer and more frequent due to warming average temperatures. This is the first time in modern recordkeeping that the Yakima basin has experienced such a prolonged drought.

3. **Why isn't there adequate snowpack this year?**
   A winter that was warmer than usual has created a record snow drought across all Western states, including Washington. By March, snowpack in the mountains that feed the Yakima

River was just 34% of average in the upper Yakima basin and 50% of average in the Naches basin. These conditions are part of a warming trend, leading to more winter precipitation falling as rain instead of snow than in the past.

4. **If we're in a drought, why do I see so much water in the Yakima River?**
   Water levels in the river fluctuate dramatically depending on seasonal rain, melting snowpack, and water releases from the reservoirs in the upper basin and do not necessarily reflect drought conditions. During summer, the Bureau of Reclamation releases water for irrigation deliveries. This increases river flow but the water has already been allocated to senior, junior, and "proratable" water rights holders, per a landmark legal adjudication in 2019 *(Department of Ecology v. Acquavella)*.

   There are also times when Reclamation may need to release water when reservoirs are high and more room is needed to accommodate rainfall and melting snowpack flowing into the reservoirs. Additionally, snow that melts below the reservoirs currently cannot be captured and runs directly into the river system. Both of these things happened in March 2026, leading to high flows in the river.

5. **How much water do we need in the Yakima basin and how much do we have stored?**
   From April through September, farms, fish, and communities in the Yakima basin need a combined total of about 2.5 million acre-feet of water for irrigation, river flows for fish, and municipal and domestic purposes. At their peak in early April, the five main reservoirs in the upper basin held 93% of their combined capacity, storing 993,000 acre-feet of water. This was 137% of average (determined by 1991-2020 data). Total combined capacity for the reservoirs is about 1.1 million acre-feet. In normal years, snowpack provides more than one million acre-feet of additional water.

6. **Why wasn't more water captured during last year's atmospheric rivers?**
   The Bureau of Reclamation operates the five main reservoirs in the upper Yakima basin – Kachess, Keechelus, Cle Elum, Bumping, and Rimrock – and manages how much water enters the Yakima River and its tributaries downstream. During the atmospheric rivers in December, warm temperatures caused precipitation to fall as rain instead of snow. Less than 16% of the land area in the Yakima basin drains through a reservoir, so large volumes of water ran straight into rivers, causing flooding and escaping storage. Reclamation did everything it could to store as much water as was physically possible while also limiting

downstream flooding. The Yakima Basin Integrated Plan is working to build more infrastructure so more surface water can be captured and stored in the future. This additional storage is essential to the basin's future.

7. **How is water distributed during a drought?**
   The Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation holds the oldest and most senior rights in the Yakima basin. They are entitled to their full allocation of water for the Tribe's Wapato Irrigation Project, regardless of drought conditions. However, in late summer 2025, water supplies became so low that for the first time, even this water right could not be fulfilled.

   Proratable and junior water rights holders – mostly irrigation districts that divert water from the Yakima River for farmers – receive reduced allocations during drought, based on river flow and what remains in the five main reservoirs after senior rights are met. The irrigation districts with the most proratable water rights are Roza Irrigation District, Kittitas Reclamation District, and Wapato Irrigation Project, and they have seen their proratable supplies cut to 50% or less in recent severe drought years.

   The Bureau of Reclamation will need to ration water supplies from April through September again this year. It's predicted that proratable irrigation districts will receive 44% or less of their full entitlements during the 2026 growing season. A goal of the Integrated Plan is to conserve and store enough water to ensure proratable water rights holders always have at least 70% of their entitlements.

8. **How is the drought impacting fish and ecosystems in the Yakima River and its tributaries?**
   Drought degrades water quality in the Yakima River, contributing to a loss of salmon, steelhead, bull trout, and lamprey. During spring, water is released from the basin's main reservoirs in strategic pulses to help flush juvenile fish ("smolts") from the Yakima River before it becomes lethally hot in the summer. However, many juvenile and adult fish still experience conditions that are too warm and shallow – especially in the lower Yakima River – for them to journey to and from the ocean. This loss of juvenile fish has a cascading effect on salmon population numbers that persists for years.

Tribal and conservation partners in the Integrated Plan are working to improve the survival of native salmon species. Water conserved through Integrated Plan projects can be used to improve instream flows to help fish. In addition, projects to improve habitat and passage for native fish are underway. These include removal of a human-made causeway at Bateman Island on the lower Yakima River in January 2026, as well as fish passage improvements that are planned for several diversion dams, including the Wapato Irrigation Project and the Sunnyside, Prosser/Chandler, and Wanawish dams.

9. **How are farmers responding to the ongoing drought?**
   The Yakima River basin is the heart of Pacific Northwest agriculture, growing a wide array of crops that include timothy hay, hops, alfalfa, apples, beans, pears, cherries, pumpkins, sunflowers, sweet corn, and wine and juice grapes. The basin produces one of the largest agricultural economies in Washington, contributing more than $4 billion annually at peak production. In response to recent drought years, growers have installed drip irrigation and ultra-high efficiency sprinklers across thousands of acres of farmland to conserve water. They have allowed some crops to go fallow and prioritized more valuable crops. In addition, they lease water from other water users, pool water between farms, and utilize emergency well permits when water is scarce.

10. **How can I help conserve water during the drought?**
    All water use throughout the basin, even relatively small amounts, matters during a drought. In some cases, even residential water use may be limited if shortages affect more senior water rights. For these reasons, conserving water and building drought resilience is important for everyone. In the short term, you can forgo car washing, water outdoor plants during the cooler times of the day and allow your lawn to go dormant. Over the long term, choosing landscaping that requires little to no supplemental irrigation can help make your property more drought resilient.

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