

Leave it to Beavers in Washington

A Four-footed Solution to Summer Water Shortages

By John Abbotts and Clark Williams-Derry

State officials expect that climate change will create some profound water supply problems in eastern Washington. But there's a potential solution that's not only cheap, but also cute and furry: beavers.

Here's the problem: according to climate scientists, warmer temperatures are already melting mountain snows earlier in the spring. That leaves streams and rivers short on water in mid-summer, just when salmon, farms, and homes really need it.

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Scientists expect that, as winter temperatures in the Northwest rise, the state's summertime water shortages will only get worse. (The preamble in this state's executive order has a nice, succinct rundown of the impacts of climate change that the state has already experienced.) To

start dealing with the state's slow-moving water crisis, Governor Gregoire asked the state ecology department to find ways to store more spring runoff. And, perhaps predictably, the department came back with some big, costly and capital-intensive ideas: dams on Hawk Creek Sand Hollow, and Crab Creek, three canyon tributaries to the Columbia River. Under the proposal, the state could pump spring snowmelt into reservoirs behind the dams, releasing it in mid-summer.

That might sound pretty reasonable, except for a few niggling details — like that fact that the dams would likely cost Washington taxpayers billions of dollars, while flooding thousands of acres of farmland and wildlife habitat.

The Lands Council, a Spokane based non-profit, thinks that it has a better idea: enhance beaver populations, and let the furry wonders do the dam construction for free!

Beavers once numbered in the millions in Washington State, before hunters nearly wiped them out for their pelts. Today, the state's beaver population has grown to about 400,000—a welcome rebound, but still just a fraction of their original abundance. And since each beaver dam can hold

three to four acre-feet of water, the Lands Council estimates that about a half-million new or relocated beavers could build enough small dams to store as much water as the big concrete behemoths — without all of the expensive construction.

Now, I have no idea if the Lands Council is right. But if the choice is between a trio of concrete dams that will cost billions, and a scoping grant for restoring beaver populations, I'll side with the beavers any day. The Department of Ecology recently awarded the Lands Council a grant to assist with research, working with landowners, and investigating the economic potential for water banking and conservation easements. And the council hosted a Working Beavers Forum at the end of March to explore the idea further.

Of course, the chance to restore beaver populations doesn't take away the sting of climate change. Still, there's a bit of comfort in realizing that, every once in a while, there's a solution to a complex human problem that's also a boon for nature.

From Sightline Daily.

We hope to have more about the Working Beavers Forum in the next issue.