LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® OF WASHINGTON

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2020 ISSUE PAPER: WATER

Position Statement

The LWVWA supports the "establishment and maintenance of minimum in-stream flows, as a public right." The LWVUS supports policies that "reflect the interrelationships of water quality and quantity, groundwater and surface water and 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 for the people of the state under federal and state regulations and guidelines such as the Clean Water Act, Safe Drinking Water Act, Water Resource Act and 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 1971 Washington Water Resource Act was an important milestone in the management and stewardship of this public resource. The Water Resource Act 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." It further acknowledges the increased competition for use of this limited resource and the importance of preserving in-stream resources. The LWVWA has been a strong proponent of water policy that supports the principles of the Water Resource Act and has lobbied to prevent legislative attempts to weaken this guiding policy for responsible stewardship of our precious water resource.

The Stream Flow Restoration Act of 2018 (Hirst response, ESSB 6091,WRC 90-94) is now Law and restoration project proposals are now coming in to the Department of Ecology. The Act did not aggressively address the problem of diminishing streamflows and aquifers, but rather enabled the resumption of using permit exempt wells for land development and addressed water supply with mitigation. To ensure recovery of instream flows and aquifers will require follow-through with implementing effective mitigation projects enabled by the Act. Find current status here: https://ecology.wa.gov/Water-Shorelines/Water-supply/Streamflow-restoration

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 2020 Legislative Session

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

- Contaminants entering our water supplies (streams and aquifers) from point and non-point sources (seepage and runoff of chemicals, 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.

- Encouraging 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 threats to health are not tested for in Washington public water supplies. We should use the best science to prioritize the most serious contaminates and create rules for testing.
- Developing and coordinating a statewide don't drip and drive program to reduce non-point 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 health of our rivers are covered in companion LWVWA issue papers. Follow progress on these issues starting in January at https://www.lwvwa.org/environment2020.

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