

Our Message to Ecology: Start Supporting Collaboration on Water Solutions

Local farmers, in new letter to WA Dept. of Ecology, express dismay at Ecology's efforts to hinder negotiated settlement and focus only on water rights litigation

(LYNDEN, Wash.) - Work to solve the Nooksack River Basin's water management crisis must support collaborative efforts to reach a negotiated settlement, rather than focus only on paying courts and lawyers, the Ag Water Board of Whatcom County insists in a new letter to the Washington Department of Ecology.

The letter, also sent to several local, state and tribal leaders, voices the local farming community's frustration with Ecology's recently exposed efforts to hinder collaboration among water users in the Nooksack basin.

"We lament Ecology's decision to force us out of this productive path and into a litigious one," the June 17 letter states. "We would much rather be spending our time, energy, and resources on solving real problems, rather than in court with lawyers."

A collaborative process is designed to pursue a negotiated settlement that could bring comprehensive solutions and major investments in infrastructure improvements to protect fish, families and farming in the basin.

"...[I]t appears that Ecology is already committed to litigation, rather than providing leadership toward collaboration and meaningful solutions," the Ag Water Board wrote, responding to Ecology's moves to primarily focus on a so-called water rights adjudication lawsuit against all water users in the basin.

Drought conditions followed by a flooding disaster just over two months later in the fall of 2021 underscored the nature of the basin's water management crisis: the twin problems of too little water at some times, and too much water at others.

"Further, an adjudication will do nothing to address the greatest threat to the citizens and natural resources of Whatcom County: climate change. Extreme flood events, low flows unrelated to out-of-stream water use, and the damage to habitat and fish will worsen over the next 20 years, and an adjudication will do nothing to address these issues," the letter stated.

"Addressing structural barriers and improving habitat seems a much better use of our time and resources," it said.