

Walla Walla County Conservation District

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June 2, 2020

To the JLARC I-900 subcommittee

RE: State Auditor's Office performance audit of the Walla Walla Watershed Management Partnership

The Walla Walla County Conservation District has been involved in water related forums in the basin for decades including the Walla Walla Watershed Management Partnership (Partnership) since its inception. We reviewed the State Auditor's Office performance audit of the Partnership and offer the following comments.

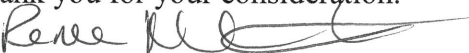
Water is a contentious subject. The Partnership has succeeded in providing a forum for stakeholders to discuss and manage water in the basin without resorting to litigation. Stakeholders in the basin have completed numerous irrigation efficiency and irrigation conveyance improvement projects to conserve water and increase flows for fish. The SAO performance audit omits these local conservation efforts in their summary.

The concept of a local water management agency is strongly encouraged. However, the Walla Walla County Conservation District has weighty concerns about transferring this over to the Washington State Dept. of Ecology and having the local input overshadowed by a state agency. The structure of the Partnership has been "handcuffed" in a way from the beginning. In theory, the Partnership had control of water management. In reality, the Partnership was bound by regulation of water rights by Ecology with little wiggle room for inventive ideas. This coupled with the financial uncertainty as described below and the Partnership was greatly restricted.

The financial uncertainty of legislative support for the Partnership led to a tenuous structure and strain on staff. The Partnership is unique compared to other agencies in that it has had to lobby for the legislative bodies to continue funding the Partnership each biennium reducing the momentum of project development and implementation.

We all want to increase flows for fish and do our part to make that happen. Differing goals/objectives of Partnership board members and their respective agencies has led to a significant amount of pushing and pulling of priorities. This, at times, has led to stalemates on certain issues, but it also shed light on many differing points of view which is ultimately was one of the strengths of the Partnership. Our hope is that some semblance of the Partnership can continue as a local voice, as we proceed to the next step in water management in the Walla Walla Basin.

Thank you for your consideration.


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District Manager