



Four cities near agreement for Cascade water Rights: Sumner yet to approve; Bonney Lake, Auburn, Buckley give OK

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Four northeast Pierce County cities could tap into the White River as a future regional water resource under an agreement scheduled to be formally signed next week.

The proposed agreement is between King County-based Cascade Water Alliance, which now owns Lake Tapps, and the lake cities of Auburn, Bonney Lake, Buckley and Sumner.

The White River flows through or near the cities and supplies Lake Tapps. Though the cities aren't thirsty now, they have few options for new water sources in the coming decades.

The agreement doesn't include sharing of treated drinking water from Lake Tapps, which won't occur until 2030 at the earliest.

Cascade's board of directors approved the agreement Wednesday afternoon. The city councils of all but Sumner have signed off on it. Sumner is set to consider it at its regular City Council meeting Monday.

"It's significant," Buckley City Administrator David Schmidt said Wednesday. "What this actually does is provide a regional solution to a water issue out there that we have been working on for two or three years."

Without it, he said "we would have all ended up in court with a big, nasty, public battle."

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The White River runs through Buckley, for example, but the city couldn't touch the water for future growth. The state had closed the river basin to new withdrawals because officials feared water sources could be overdrawn, hurting fish and the environment.

The new agreement doesn't guarantee Buckley more water, Schmidt said, but it opens up the possibility. The state Department of Ecology approves all water rights.

Under terms of the agreement, Cascade would assist the four cities in meeting their projected 50-year water needs by:

- Allowing them to buy, individually or jointly, up to 10 million gallons per day of water Cascade has already purchased from Tacoma Public Utilities. The cost would be lower than buying directly from Tacoma today.
- Reserving for the cities up to 7 cubic feet per second of the water flowing through the White River. The extra water would allow the cities to apply to the state for a water right to that excess water.

Chuck Clarke, chief executive officer for Cascade, said Wednesday that the agency is seeking a water right for consumptive use but also will apply to leave some water in the river for the cities' use.

Portions of the agreement hinge on the state's approval of Cascade's water right. It is expected later this year.

The agreement also would set up a Lake Tapps Municipal Advisory Group to advise the cities on any Cascade actions relating to Lake Tapps and the cities.

Auburn, which has sued Cascade over its White River water right application, also would agree to drop its lawsuit.

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The agreement appears to end for now the animosity that had grown between Bellevue-based Cascade – a nonprofit corporation composed of eight municipalities – and Pierce County cities and residents, who were upset over what they viewed as a water grab by King County.

Dan Grigsby, public works director for Bonney Lake, said Wednesday that the agreement would allow his city to save more than half the cost of its future water needs.

He called the negotiations “most professional” and termed the result a “win-win” for all involved.

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