

December 17, 2012

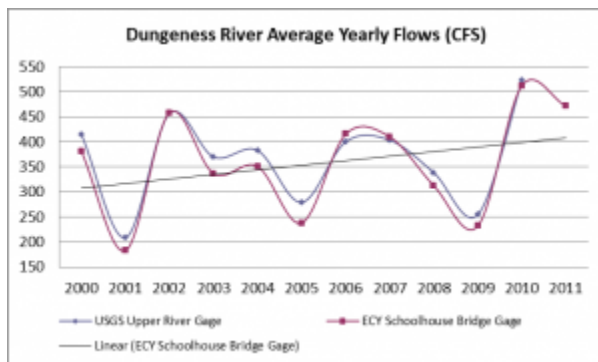
My sincerest wish to everyone is for a Merry Christmas and a prosperous and happy 2013!

Lots of learning this year for your new Commissioner, chiefly in two areas: how the interpersonal dynamics work for Mike Doherty, Mike Chapman, and me; and rapid learning in two policy areas (water law and public works vs. the Growth Management Act, with respect to the wastewater infrastructure in Carlsborg).

I won't dwell on the Carlsborg topic except to say that after at least 15 years, we seem to be moving fairly quickly toward construction. This project is driven by legal requirements of the Growth Management Act. From the data I've seen, we are not at a crisis point for groundwater contamination in Carlsborg, but this project will ensure that that doesn't happen. I'm happy to say that my efforts to arrive at a common-sense and less expensive solution have paid off, and the County, the PUD, and the City of Sequim are in partnership – PUD and the County will work the infrastructure in Carlsborg, and pipe the sewage to the Sequim sewer system for treatment. This takes advantage of the large amount of capacity the Sequim's plant has, and also takes advantage of public dollars already spent.

I want to spend a good deal of space going over the Water Resources Inventory Area 18-east water rule that the Department of Ecology just finalized and published. When I took office this past January, I thought the rule was not really necessary, since I believe that we are not in a water shortage crisis. Data seem to bear this out: this is a graph of Dungeness river flow as measured in two places – above the irrigation outtakes (US Geological Survey) and at the Schoolhouse Bridge by the old Dungeness School (WA Dept. of Ecology).

(click on image for larger view)



As you can see, the linear trend line is up for the Schoolhouse Bridge gage. As you also can see, river flows fluctuate depending on rainfall and snowpack. However, the Dept of Ecology has been at this rulemaking for almost 20 years and was going to get it done this year – they hold all the cards legally, and there is nothing anyone could have done to stop them. The County Commission in combination with other governments in the rule area (Bell Creek on the east to Bagley Creek on the west) could have objected to the rulemaking, but I quickly determined that there was insufficient political will to do so. I certainly could not have expected a unanimous County Commission to suddenly reverse course and come out united in opposition to Ecology's action. The County Commission had approved a

Dungeness River watershed plan in 2005, containing all the information Ecology used to craft the rule, and I found that I could not find a way to set that plan aside – despite my best efforts to assert that the scientific basis for the rule is outdated – field measurements were taken over 20 years ago.

So my “plan B” was to try to find a way to lessen the rule’s financial impact on our citizens – almost exclusively on new permit-exempt wells outside Sequim, PUD, or other large group water systems. I discovered that the Legislature had provided over \$2 million for mitigating groundwater withdrawals in Skagit County in the 2012 legislative session, and long story short, prevailed upon Ecology (with the able assistance of Sen. Jim Hargrove) to put a like amount in their budget to take care of the cost of household uses here in our County. So at least there will be some offset to what would otherwise have been significant cost, in addition to the cost of drilling a well. Not an entirely satisfactory solution, but far better than I had expected to achieve. We’ll find out on the 18th what the Governor’s budget contains for this line item; and we’ll have to stay at it to encourage Gov.-elect Inslee not to remove it or modify it in a bad way after he takes office in mid-January.

A word about strategy now that the first phase is done – I could very well have just yelled “no” as loudly as I could, and tried to make it as politically difficult as I could for Ecology to finish the rulemaking effort. That would have utterly failed to achieve anything useful, since as I mentioned, Ecology’s rulemaking effort was in its final stage when I took office. I believed it was far better to stay engaged, fight for making the rule significantly less costly when it took effect, and work with our Senator to help get money from the State’s capital budget to accomplish that for the next two decades. So far, my strategy has paid off. I wish the outcome could have been better – as I said, we are not in a water crisis, and I don’t believe we are in for any rapid land development that will put us there anytime soon. If rain and snow amounts diminish significantly, perhaps we will be, but no one can know or control that outcome. I will stay on this to ensure that implementation of Ecology’s rule creates as little difficulty and expense as possible for those who want to develop their land – as they have a perfect right to do. A silver lining – this rule may make a federal endangered species lawsuit (for the species of salmon listed as endangered in our County) less likely; and it will enable Ecology to begin processing water rights and water permits, which have been on hold for decades.

For 2013, the two big things I foresee are labor negotiations for our County’s workforce, and to make the cost of our operations affordable for the future – for the past several years, we’ve had to dip into operating reserves, and this year into one of our capital accounts, to be able to afford the cost of our workforce, despite laying off about 16 people last year. This will be a major challenge, and I’ve been designated as lead Commissioner for labor negotiations. And toward the latter part of the year, the Commission will take up the update to our County’s Shoreline Master Plan, when our elected Community Development Director, Sheila Roark-Miller, presents it to the Commission for our action. It will again be a busy year!

That’s enough for now – my best wishes to you and yours during the holidays!

Jim McEntire,
Clallam County Commissioner District 1

