

HOUSE BILL REPORT

ESHB 1571

As Passed Legislature

Title: An act relating to the adjudication of water rights.

Brief Description: Regarding the adjudication of water rights.

Sponsors: House Committee on Agriculture & Natural Resources (originally sponsored by Representatives Blake and Chandler; by request of Department of Ecology).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Agriculture & Natural Resources: 1/30/09, 2/20/09 [DPS].

Floor Activity:

Passed House: 3/12/09, 84-12.

Senate Amended.

Passed Senate: 4/14/09, 30-17.

House Concurred.

Passed House: 4/20/09, 69-29.

Passed Legislature.

Brief Summary of Engrossed Substitute Bill

- Establishes the requirements for the adjudication claims.
- Encourages the settlement of adjudication claims out of court.
- Provides criteria for the disqualification of judges.
- Modernizes language relating to water right adjudications.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE & NATURAL RESOURCES

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 12 members: Representatives Blake, Chair; Chandler, Ranking Minority Member; Smith, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Jacks, Kretz, Lias, McCoy, Nelson, Ormsby, Pearson, Van De Wege and Warnick.

Staff: Jaclyn Ford (786-7339)

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Background:

The state's Surface Water Code establishes a general adjudication procedure. An adjudication can determine rights to surface water, ground water, or both. Holders of water rights or watershed planning units may petition the Department of Ecology (DOE) to start an adjudication. The DOE may also do so at its own discretion. Such a proceeding is conducted in the superior court with the DOE as the plaintiff. Each person filing a statement of claim in the proceeding must pay a filing fee to the court. The DOE, or a designee of the DOE, takes testimony and files a report with the court of its findings regarding the water rights of all of the entities claiming water rights in the proceeding. The expenses incurred by the state in such a proceeding or upon an appeal are borne by the state.

Summary of Engrossed Substitute Bill:

Commencement of Adjudication.

After a petition by a water right holder or planning unit, the DOE must file a statement with the court. Prior to filing an adjudication, the DOE must consult with the Administrative Office of the Courts to determine whether there are sufficient judicial resources available to conduct an adjudication in a timely manner. The DOE must report to the Legislature on the estimated budget needs for the superior court and the DOE to conduct the adjudication.

The court is encouraged to conduct the water rights adjudication with innovative practices and technologies, such as filing documents electronically, using teleconferencing for appearances, and pre-filing testimony.

Summons.

Service of the summons may either be by personal service or certified mail. If a potential claimant cannot be found within Washington or fails to sign a receipt for the certified mail summons, summons may be made in a publication of general circulation in the county where the subject water is found. Summons must be served at least 60 days before the required return date of the summons and the return date must be between 100 and 130 days after the order.

The summons will require the claimants to appear and file a claim to the subject water involved. If the claimant fails to file a claim, the court may issue a default judgment. A party in default may file a late claim under the same circumstances the party could respond or defend under court rules on default judgments.

Preliminary Investigation.

Upon receiving the adjudication claims and filing the claimants' evidence, the DOE must conduct a preliminary investigation to examine the uses of the subject waters. After the preliminary investigation, the DOE must file with the court the findings of the investigation, and: (1) enter a motion for a partial decree in favor of all the stated claims; (2) enter a motion seeking determination of contested claims; or (3) both.

Referee.

The superior court may appoint a referee or other judicial officer to assist the court.

Settlement.

Out-of-court settlements are encouraged.

Final Decree.

Upon the court's determination of all issues, the court must issue a final decree and provide notice of the decree to all parties.

Disqualification of a Judge.

A judge may be partially or fully disqualified from hearing an adjudication. Partial disqualification means disqualification from hearing specified claims. Full disqualification means disqualification from hearing any aspect of the adjudication. A judge is partially disqualified when the judge's impartiality might reasonably be questioned and the apparent or actual partiality is limited to specified claims. A judge is fully disqualified when the judge's impartiality might reasonably be questioned, and the apparent or actual partiality extends beyond limited claims so that the judge should not hear any part of the adjudication.

Appeals.

Any party to an appeal may move the court to certify portions of the appeal to the Pollution Control Hearings Board, but the appellant must file a motion for certification no later than 90 days after the appeal is filed.

Fees.

At the time of filing an adjudication claim, the claimant must pay the clerk of the superior court a fee of \$25. Within 90 days after the final decree, each party must pay the DOE \$50 for preparing and issuing a water right certificate.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) This bill will make necessary adjustments. Once an adjudication occurs, it makes water management more efficient. This bill will make the process more timely and use court time better. This bill requires the DOE to do advance work and will lessen the amount of time spent in court. This bill includes measures that were recommendations from the 2003 Water Disputes Task Force. This bill allows for timely decisions and court efficiency. Money should be funneled through the judiciary system and not the DOE.

(With concerns) This bill does not help move along current adjudications. This bill would leave us severely disadvantaged in the Idaho adjudication. This bill would allow the DOE to exclude groundwater claimants; they need to be in the adjudication. The *Aquavella* pretrial procedures should be codified. This may impair a claimant's ability to protect his or her water right. The deadlines are too short; superior court civil rules should apply.

(Opposed) Limited adjudications give the DOE too much discretion. Current law gives individual water users the ability to settle disputes in court, which is a much better option than adjudication.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Representative Blake, prime sponsor; Ken Slattery, Department of Ecology; Rick Neidhart, Superior Court Judges Association; and Peter Dykstra, Washington Rivers Conservancy.

(With concerns) Kathleen Collins, Washington Water Policy Alliance; Joe Mentor, Mentor Law Group; Dawn Vyvyan, Yakama Nation; and Rob Kavanaugh.

(Opposed) Mike Schwisow, Washington State Water Resources Association.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.