

FINAL BILL REPORT

SSB 5860

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Synopsis as Enacted

Brief Description: Concerning water policy in regions with regulated reductions in aquifer levels.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Agriculture, Water, Natural Resources & Parks (originally sponsored by Senators Warnick, Dozier and Schoesler).

Senate Committee on Agriculture, Water, Natural Resources & Parks
House Committee on Rural Development, Agriculture & Natural Resources

Background: Ground Water Management Subareas. Ground Water Management Subareas may be established by rules adopted by the Department of Ecology (Ecology) to address declining aquifer levels and regulate withdrawals of public ground water.

Ecology has the authority to enter into agreements with the United States and irrigation districts to offset aquifer depletions due to ground water withdrawals. The agreements allow conserved surface water to be delivered to certain deep well irrigated lands. Where such deliveries occur, Ecology must issue a superseding water right permit or certificate to indicate that the unused portion of a replaced subarea ground water right is a reserve right with low flow protection from relinquishment. This reserve right may again be used if the delivery of conserved water is curtailed or otherwise unavailable. The total acreage irrigated under the subarea ground water right and delivered water must not exceed quantity or acreage limits described in the ground water permit or certificate.

Relinquishment. Under the relinquishment statute, if a water right holder abandons or voluntarily fails to beneficially use all or any part of their water right for five successive years without sufficient cause, the right or portion unused reverts to the state. The relinquishment statute provides a list of sufficient causes for voluntary nonuse that protect a water right from relinquishment. Examples of sufficient causes include drought or unavailability of water, certain military service, the operation of legal proceedings, or when waiting for a final determination from Ecology on a change application. Water right holders who can show a sufficient cause do not relinquish their right to water even if it has

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been more than five years without that water being put to beneficial use.

The statute includes a list of exemptions under which there is no relinquishment. Examples of these exemptions include the use of water rights for power development, water rights used only in times of drought or low flow periods, municipal water supply for residential purposes, and water that is placed in the Trust Water Rights Program.

Odessa Groundwater Subarea. Ecology has adopted rules establishing the Odessa Groundwater Management Subarea. In 2006, the Legislature established a process for a water right holder to avoid relinquishment for the non-use of a groundwater right from the Odessa aquifer for a period of 15 years if certain conditions are satisfied. A water user who failed to exercise a right to withdraw ground water from the Odessa aquifer subarea was deemed to have done so involuntarily due to a drought or low flow period, and thus did not relinquish their right to use the water. The amount of water that was not used was considered a standby or reserve water supply, and could be used after the period of non-use had ended, if certain conditions were met. The process required water right holders who chose not to use water to notify Ecology in writing within 180 days of stopping the water use and upon the recommencement of use. These provisions expired July 1, 2021.

Summary: The process for a water right holder to avoid relinquishment for the non-use of a groundwater right from the Odessa aquifer if certain conditions are satisfied is reestablished. A water user who fails to exercise a right to withdraw ground water from the Odessa aquifer subarea is deemed to have done so involuntarily due to a drought or low flow period, and does not relinquish their right to use the water. The amount of water that is not used was considered a standby or reserve water supply, and may be used after the period of non-use has ended, if certain conditions are met, including:

- the reduction in water use must result from conservation practices, water use efficiencies, crop type or rotation changes, an unavailability of water, economic hardship, infrastructure costs, or participation in an effort to reduce aquifer depletion;
- the withdraw or diversion facility is maintained in good operating condition; and
- Ecology has not issued a superseding water right permit or certificate to designate a portion of the ground water right replaced by water from the federal Columbia Basin Project.

Water right holders who choose not to use water must notify Ecology in writing within 180 days of stopping the water use and upon the recommencement of use. Water right holders who notified Ecology under the prior process are deemed to have provided notice to Ecology under the reestablished process.

Votes on Final Passage:

Senate	43	4
House	97	0

Effective: June 9, 2022