Glacier study again highlights need for more water storage

Yakima Herald-Republic editorial board

Put aside the debate over whether natural cycles or human intervention cause climate change. Truth is, the planet is in the midst of a warming trend, and our future economic health requires steps to deal with it.

A Portland State University study has concluded that the 12 glaciers on 12,276-foot Mount Adams, Central Washington's iconic peak, have receded by 46 percent since 1904. The Portland State geology professor and a team of students arrived at that conclusion after studying aerial photographs, information system mapping and historical photos taken by hikers.

Other studies have found declines in the North Cascades, on Mount Rainier and Mount Hood. But Mount Adams' data showed the most severe drop in that group. Mount Adams' glaciers don't directly supply Yakima Valley irrigation systems, but they do reflect a pronounced trend toward reduced snowpack in the Cascades. A federal report says the water content in Cascades snowpack could drop as much as 50 percent in the next 60 years.

That would have a tremendous impact in the Valley. A report by the Climate Impacts Group at the University of Washington predicts water shortages in nearly a third of the years in the decade starting in 2020.

This has caught the attention of Yakima Valley growers and residents who depend on the local ag economy. It no doubt has grabbed the attention of officials statewide; the Central Washington ag industry is a huge component of the state's economy, a fact that has been noted by Gov. Chris Gregoire.

A diverse group of Yakima River Basin interests is well on its way toward developing a plan to increase the Valley's water supply. The plan's provisions include expanded storage at Bumping Lake, a new reservoir at Wymer near the Yakima River Canyon, fish ladders at basin dams, water conservation and water marketing, preservation of forest and shrub steppe habitats, groundwater storage, and operational changes to make better use of available supplies.

It's ambitious, with a total price tag of $5 billion. It's also a balance of conservation and construction that has won widespread support, including from Interior Secretary Ken Salazar.

Stakeholders were hoping for $14 million in federal Bureau of Reclamation funds and $6 million from the state. The project's planning group was told last month that the money may have to wait another two or three years.

We understand the tight economic times, and we understand the governments having to set priorities. But just because the funding is on the back burner doesn't mean the burner should be turned off.
The interests involved -- local governments, the Yakama Nation, irrigators, state and federal agencies and a consortium of conservation groups -- have done an impressive job getting it to this point. They are well-advised to continue pressing the case for the project. Reports like the Mount Adams glacier conclusions offer further evidence of the need to move forward with basin storage.

* Members of the Yakima Herald-Republic editorial board are Sharon J. Prill, Bob Crider, Frank Purdy and Karen Troianello.