Rivers, streams, and groundwater systems are the lifeblood of Washington State. Clean, abundant water is essential for our communities, our economy, and healthy ecosystems. Yet many of our waterways are over-allocated, creating unhealthy conditions for fish and wildlife and depleting drinking water aquifers. While the allocation of ‘water rights’ has slowed, land developers routinely seek legislation to ease restrictions on drilling new wells. It is critical to maintain statutory protections for the environment and the ‘public interest’ when water supply is at issue.

**LEGISLATIVE GOAL #1: Water supply and water rights should favor environment and public values**

Sierra Club opposes bills that ‘guarantee’ water supply to new development regardless of the condition of the resource. Sierra Club also opposes bills that eliminate consideration of the environment, efficiency, and public values when water right decisions are made.

Washington’s water laws must be protected and strengthened to ensure that waterways are not overtapped:

- Rapid development, particularly in rural and suburban areas, has depleted groundwater supplies across the state.
- An estimated half million wells exist in Washington, with 5,000-10,000 new wells being drilled each year.
- Rivers and aquifers are almost always hydraulically connected, so groundwater depletion also degrades freshwater habitats.
- Rural development depends on “permit exempt wells” which do not require a water right or assessment of impacts.
- Despite requirements to evaluate water supplies when approving land use decisions, many local governments do not do so.
- Water users and local governments are asking for explicit legislative authority to allow new development to drill new wells water, regardless of the impact on local streams and groundwater.

Rural development often relies on individual wells that deplete aquifers and harm streams.
**LEGISLATIVE GOAL #2:**
‘First in Time and First in Right’ for rivers

In 2013, Sierra Club will support bills that protect and promote clean, flowing water for our rivers. Sierra Club opposes bills that allow the revival of unused water rights.

‘Paper’ water rights harm the environment and existing water users:

- Washington has more than 250,000 water rights on the books, but many of them have never been fully exercised.
- Many state rivers are over-allocated and lack sufficient water to support salmon migration and other aquatic uses.
- When water users expand their usage, it depletes water in aquifers and streams, making conditions worse.
- The Department of Ecology is tasked with adopting rules to protect flows in rivers, yet has not done so for nearly two-thirds of Washington’s watersheds.

**LEGISLATIVE GOAL #3:**
Strong science so that good management decisions can be made

In 2013, the Sierra Club supports bills that promote science-based water management – such as groundwater monitoring, stream gages, water usage meters and reporting, and efficiency standards – that will help us prepare for the hydrologic challenges of climate change.

Climate change will affect the timing and availability of water, yet we lack basic information about the status of our waterways and our usage.

- Washington lacks comprehensive data about groundwater systems.
- Stream gages that measure annual flows are being shut down for lack of funding.
- Universal metering of household and agricultural water use is needed in order to properly conserve water. Conserving water conserves energy too.
- Washington does not have standards for efficient use of water.
- State water management agencies are under-funded – and our rivers and aquifers do not receive protections mandated by law.

**WANT TO GET INVOLVED?**
Please contact Cody Young at (206) 378-0114 or cody.young@sierraclub.org to learn more about our legislative program and how you can help.

The Sierra Club’s members are 700,000 of your friends and neighbors. Inspired by nature, we work together to protect our communities and the planet. The Club is America’s oldest, largest and most influential grassroots environmental organization.