

Native Currents

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by: [Billy Frank Jr.](#) / Guest columnist

Not an isolated case

So-called exempt wells could potentially run our rivers dry. Our rivers are connected to the groundwaters, and what affects one affects the other.

Under state law, property owners can tap up to 5,000 gallons of groundwater every day and be exempted from getting a permit. There are no limits under current state law for watering livestock, gardens or lawns. The 5,000-gallon limitation applies to home and industrial uses, including irrigation. Pumping more than that takes a permit, unless, of course, you're willing to cheat - and unfortunately, many do just that. Clean, fresh water is just about as rare as, and even more valuable than, gasoline, and that leads to thievery.

Five thousand gallons may not seem like much. But multiply those individual exemptions by the hundreds of thousands of property owners and millions of new residents in this state and, well, you don't need to be a genius to realize we're talking about a lot of water.

When I speak about fish and wildlife, and the need to restore and protect the habitat our fellow creatures need to survive, water is always fundamental in the equation. If our rivers are drawn down to nothing - places like southern California have shown it's possible - there will be little if any fish and wildlife. The quality of life in the Northwest would nose dive, and people would begin to get pretty thirsty.

So, what can we do to get off the crazy roller coaster of water mismanagement by the state?

The Squaxin Island Tribe recently provided one example. The tribe asked the state to halt the drilling of new wells in the Johns Creek watershed. Summer flows in Johns Creek already are far below the minimum required by the state's own rules to protect spawning salmon. Through these many wells, water is withdrawn that would normally flow into the creek. More than 270 new wells have been drilled in the Johns Creek watershed over the past few decades, all legally exempt from state permits.

The actual amount of water taken has never been measured. But, believe me, it's significant. Exempting hundreds of thousands of gallons of water every day is mismanagement, plain and simple. Let's face it. The state does not know how much water there is to allocate, let alone how much is exempt from permits.

What's happening to the water resource in the Johns Creek watershed is not an isolated case. It's happening throughout the state every day.

It's time to push for better water management, and to ensure that water levels in our rivers are adequate to sustain our natural heritage. Whether it's by resolution, legislation, public

pressure, litigation or negotiated agreement, we have to make substantial changes in the way water is managed.

The Squaxin Island Tribe is filing its resolution under a provision of state law that closes a watershed from future withdrawals if the information available to justify those future withdrawals is inadequate. Basically, the tribe is just asking that the state enforce its own law. What a concept!

The state's own water law is based on the premise of "first in time, first in use." Is there any question that fish, wildlife and tribes were here first?

Billy Frank Jr., Nisqually, is chairman of the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission in Olympia, Wash., and recipient of the Indian Country Today 2004 American Indian Visionary Award.