

Lower Methow - Community Drought Meeting

Tuesday, August 19th, 2025 | 5pm-7pm

The Local Church, 153 Roadhouse Restaurant, HWY 20, Carlton WA

<https://tinyurl.com/LDPPmethow>

SUMMARY NOTES:

Welcome & Purpose

people were in attendance (9 in person and 7 online) for the meeting. A reporter from the Methow Valley News also attended. Partners represented were the Okanogan Conservation District (OCD), Methow Watershed Council (MWC), and WSU's Water Research Center.

Rita (MWC) introduced herself and the Local Drought Preparedness Project (LDPP) and goals for tonight's meeting. She began the conversation by asking the audience "what brought you here tonight?"

A few similar responses were said relating to a vague concern for increasing likelihood and severity of drought and decreased water supply. One attendee stated that he wanted to know the reason behind the planning effort, considering that a much worse drought had struck in 1977; he stated that the Twisp River was so low that you could walk across it without getting your feet wet, and also mentioned that the snowpack was so low that the North Cascades Highway never closed.

Presentation

Boo Turner (MWC) introduced the Local Drought Preparedness Project (LDPP) and goals for tonight's meeting. David Asia (MWC) continued with a project overview presentation discussing local drought conditions, research data, and future trends for Okanogan County. Jordana Ellis (Okanogan CD) added some info regarding the planning process. David emphasized that the LDPP partners want to hear what the participants know and see, and how it impacts them, to create a roadmap for local drought response. There will be two more community meetings following the one in Carlton. He then presented and explained slides about local drought conditions, research data, and future trends for Okanogan County.

Discussion and questions during the presentation included:

Sub-areas in the Methow were defined based on geography and demographic factors such as income and race.

The project will run for two years and seeks to address human and environmental needs.

Data shows a trend toward shorter periods of normal precipitation, longer periods of drought, earlier runoff, and lower than normal flows.

How can we prepare for significantly less water? Prepare early, maintain community. What does it take to engage the community? Identified user groups, complex web of interrelationships

Dr. Asia introduced the model the OCD has developed to categorize risks based on impacts to social and human health, livelihood and economy, and the environment. He explained that participants will be asked to identify and categorize risks, and introduced MWC Outreach Coordinator Rita Stewart.

Community Storytelling Workshop

Rita broke the meeting into 3 groups of 3-4 w/a MWC member in each to discuss three prompts focused on experiences with drought, risks to water availability and local supply, and impacts in the community. Once that was done, participants would be asked to associate impacts with a place and mark it on the map with a sticker or sticky note.

Participants were asked to consider one or more of the following questions:

- What have you noticed about water in the Methow? Are you concerned about anything you have noticed?
- How have you been, or how do you think you, your livelihood, or your lifestyle might be affected by diminishing water supply or drought?
- What do you feel is missing from our conversations about and planning for the potential of continuing drought in the Methow?

One hay farmer in attendance spoke of his poor experience with the Methow Valley Irrigation District during their period of legal troubles and shift away from using irrigation canals. He expressed much greater peace of mind owning his water right rather than depending on the then struggling irrigation district. This attendee mentioned that with the shift in runoff patterns, irrigators should be allowed to withdraw/divert water earlier in the season when there is abundant water and crops are starting to grow. Middle-valley folks have concerns because they needed to start watering earlier, but are running up against permitted water quantity limits. He values the freedom to manage water withdrawals voluntarily, in collaboration with neighbors, rather than being curtailed from the top down.

Other concerns expressed were irresponsible, or mismanagement of water on properties that were formerly irrigated fields and are now subdivided. Where there once were green fields that were both firebreaks and economic output, are now homes with more abundant weed patches.

One attendee criticized the USFS over their mismanagement of the forests, not only are they extremely fuel dense, but the thicker stands transpire much more water, leaving less in the ground and streams. Apparently this was something suggested long ago and was not acted on.

There were concerns about the use-it-or-lose-it provisions in Washington's water law. Many are not confident about water banking and would like to better understand how it works. Taking advantage of the ability to temporarily leave water in streams and not lose it could make a huge impact on how we are using water across the county. Water use could be very different if all felt confident using water banking.

One need brought up by multiple participants was the need to slow the progress of water between the mountains and the sea. We must more effectively use it to feed plants and animals so that as it flows

through, it's done its job. As things grow, they can create their own weather patterns, such as in forests—need to learn more about that. Need more conversation about the science of water use, most effective ways to use water to perpetuate the health of animals, people, everything.

One attendee added that in thinking about water moving from mountains to ocean, to also think about the role beavers can play. That is a water-retention solution we can work on; by putting in plants beavers can eat and use for dams.

There is much more advanced irrigation technology that could be used to improve the application efficiency of individuals' systems, however this equipment is extremely expensive and unattainable to most farmers in the Methow. One attendee would like to see funding available to give to people to make improvements. They are aware of the Irrigation Efficiencies Grant Program but it's capacity is limited; could a fund be established to help people the Okanogan CD cannot?

One attendee stated that geo-engineering has the ability to change weather patterns. There has not been enough study of its effect on plants, the environment, weather patterns, fire hazard. We need to open a conversation about what is happening, enter those facts into the dialogue.

One attendee noted that the Methow Valley is in a unique position, with a strong community. Sixty or 70 years ago, the valley was self-sustaining. A lot has been lost, to fire and drought. Burned areas do not hold snow due to lack of shade; that is contributing to earlier runoff. Now retirees are financing their farms using their pensions, and working to make them self-sustaining again, e.g., with modern grazing management practices that rely on irrigation. If people better understand the problem, the community can and will work together to find solutions , and become self-reliant.

A common sentiment was that younger people are busy raising their families and do not have time for meetings like this one. We see the need for outreach, personal responsibility, working together as a community. Water literacy is important; the hydrologic cycle, how it's changing, and the knowledge people need to make decisions as a community. Also, water conservation practices should be taught for irrigators: what equipment to use, time of day, weather conditions, etc.

There was some criticism of the Department of Ecology over their efforts to pipe irrigation ditches. They expressed that the water ECY deemed as "waste" due to seepage was helping to recharge aquifers and would eventually re-enter the river later in the season. Whereas with a pipe, there would be no groundwater recharge and the excess would be sent back into the river downstream; this is the opposite of storage.

Next Steps & Closing

Partners thanked the participants and said there will be other opportunities to participate in the project. There will be a survey. Partners will be at the Twisp Farmers' Market with the survey once it's available.

Meeting adjourned at 7:02 p.m.