

OUR VALLEY-OUR WATER-OUR CHOICE

We all know that water is absolutely vital to our lives. And here in the Methow Valley, water is vital to sustain our agriculture, our communities, and our way of life. It is vital to maintain the rural feel of our community. And it is vital to protect the natural resources we all enjoy.

This year a high-powered investment company from back east, Crown Columbia Water Resources, has been in our valley buying or, trying to buy, agricultural water rights. Crown Columbia then strips the water from the land where it is being used and moves it out of the valley. This company, and other buyers like it, offer large sums of money for the water rights and can be very aggressive in their approach to landowners. It can understandably be a difficult decision to say no to such pressure and offers of money.

There are certainly other circumstances that put pressure on a water right holder to sell their water. Some folks have farmed or ranched all their lives but either have no offspring to take over the farm or their children aren't interested in following that way of life.

The reasons for selling aren't the issue. The issue is that once sold, the water rights can be moved out of the valley never to return.

How can this happen? By law, Methow Valley water rights can be transferred downstream, out of the valley, to be used on other lands and for other purposes, e.g., development, agribusiness. For us here in the Methow Valley it is critical to understand what this means: When a water right is transferred out of the valley, it is gone forever. There is no practical mechanism to allow the water to be moved back upstream, and there is no watershed upstream from us to provide us with new water rights. We here simply couldn't afford to match payments by big money interests further downstream on the Columbia River. The land in our valley that was irrigated and productive would forever be arid and no longer be farmed.

For those of you with water rights you want to sell:

The Methow Watershed Council, Trout Unlimited, and the Okanogan Conservation District are in the process of setting up a water exchange to keep water here in the Methow Basin. Here's how an exchange would work.

If you intend to sell your water right, the Twisp Office of Trout Unlimited will meet with you and do a confidential assessment of your water right. They will answer basic questions such as: Is your water right valid? Is it interruptible? How much water has been beneficially used and therefore available for sale? If after this consultation you still want to sell your right, TU would lease your water right at a negotiated annual rate until a buyer is found. At that point, you will receive the full purchase price for your water right in addition to lease payments up to that time.

The exchange will only list water rights for sale or lease that will continue to be used here in the valley.

For Valley residents without water rights or with no intention of selling your rights:

We all care about our valley and keeping water here, not seeing it moved downstream and out of the Methow basin. On a personal level, we can talk about water and the threat of losing it with our friends and neighbors. The more we coalesce as a community around this issue, the harder it will become for

potential buyers who want to move water out of the valley. Time and again we have shown the strength of our community in fending off other threats to our environment and our way of life. Stay informed about what is going on with water and pay attention to what is happening in your area.

One good way to stay informed is by attending the monthly meetings of the Methow Watershed Council held on the 3rd Thursday of every month at 5 p.m. at the Riverbank in Twisp.

Another is to read the weekly legal notices published in the Methow Valley News and comment to the Water Conservancy Board ([Lisa deVera](#)) or Ecology on any proposals to transfer or sell water rights that raise the issues you are concerned about. Even short comments are important comments – every single one of them will need to be addressed for any transfer or sale to be approved.

A powerful way to reach your fellow community members is by writing letters to the editor of the Methow Valley News. Point out the critical importance of water rights staying in our valley for use on our lands. If Crown Columbia or any other entity comes looking to buy our water, don't be shy in pointing out who these people are, who is backing them, and what they intend to do with the water once it is purchased- strip it from the land and sell it downstream for the highest price they can obtain.

On a broader level, let our legislators know what an important issue the out-of-basin water transfers are to us here in a headwater basin. There is no upstream source of new water rights for us. Once the water is gone, it's gone forever. With increasingly hotter seasons and recurrent large forest fires, we need irrigated fields more than ever. Our valley agriculture helps us become a more self-sufficient and sustainable community.

There will be proposed legislation for the 2019 legislative session to limit out-of-basin water right transfers. Watch for news of the legislation on the Methow Watershed website and hopefully in our local newspaper. We will need community support for the proposed legislation and ask you to weigh in when the time comes.

Water- we are all in this together. Thank you for all you do.