Wenatchee World - Dec. 13, 2017

**Guest Opinion | Icicle Creek success depends on collaboration and openness**

by Ben Greuel

Washington State Regional Director, The Wilderness Society

Recent op-eds and news coverage in The Wenatchee World illuminate tensions inherent when multiple interests seek to resolve complex issues. In this case, the issue is the Icicle Work Group’s (IWG) effort to address water needs in the Wenatchee basin and Icicle Creek.

This matter came into focus in the Nov. 8 Wenatchee World article, “Icicle Work Group’s effort to resolve water lawsuits could end up in litigation.” The article suggests that concerns around the replacement of an outlet valve on Snow Lake in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness foreshadows potential ongoing conflict between the IWG and the conservation and recreation community on the strategy for addressing Icicle Creek’s water needs.

While litigation is always a possibility with complex issues, it is not inevitable. Finding middle ground that supports water for fish, agriculture, municipalities and wilderness values is in everyone’s interest, and the Wilderness Society’s preferred approach to protecting public lands and supporting local communities.

That’s why we have been active in the Yakima Basin Integrated Plan (YBIP), both in its formation and implementation. This broad collaboration is seeking to protect public lands and waters, restore fish populations, meet municipal water needs, improve infrastructure and foster a sustainable economy. While not perfect, the collaboration has resulted in substantive progress on complex issues.

As with the Yakima Basin, there are many demands on Icicle Creek. It needs a dependable minimum stream flow; wild and hatchery fish require adequate water, and downstream users demand water for irrigation and municipal consumption.

The Alpine Lake Wilderness is critical to meeting these needs. Wilderness lands ensure cold, clean water. The unique qualities of the Alpine Lakes also attract visitors from around the world to its spectacular landscape. These visitors and outdoor recreationists reinforce the local economy with spending on gear, food, services, lodging and much more.

The Snow Lake valve issue provides an important lesson – that a clear and open process is critically important. In October, the Bureau of Reclamation requested public comment on a Snow Lake Valve Control Draft Environmental Assessment (EA), a project connected to the IWG’s strategy. The assessment reported the planned replacement valve to be 60 percent larger than the original. The proposed change is substantial, with significant potential impacts for Snow Lake, stream flows and the Alpine Lakes Wilderness—none of which was analyzed or justified in the EA. That such important information was absent in the EA, and that the public comment period was extremely short, caused concern about the process, its transparency and communications overall.

Because of significant stakeholder input, the Bureau of Reclamation announced it will re-open the comment period in mid-December and conduct additional analysis. This is a positive step in recognizing the importance of stakeholder involvement, engagement of appropriate agencies, and full consideration of the laws that guide such projects.

It is understood the Leavenworth National Fish Hatchery and Icicle Peshastin Irrigation District have water rights and infrastructure pre-dating the designation of the Alpine Lake Wilderness. And just as these rights must be respected, the Wilderness Act must also be honored and its requirements followed.

Water is life and the Alpine Lakes Wilderness is an amazing asset for ensuring quality water remains available now and in the future. To achieve this, a “big picture” mindset must be adopted by all that includes: (1) an open public process in which both the overall Icicle Strategy and individual projects are transparent and appropriately reviewed; (2) a commitment to seeking creative solutions throughout the entire Icicle Creek system; and (3) a renewed commitment in adhering to all of the IWG’s guiding principles, including complying with the laws and process defined in wilderness legislation.

The opportunity is available to make this effort more collaborative and open, and to resolve issues before litigation becomes a considered option. How the IWG decides to address this as it completes the environmental review of the Icicle Strategy will set the stage for what comes next.