

# SENATE BILL REPORT

## SB 5199

---

---

As Reported by Senate Committee On:  
Agriculture, Water & Rural Economic Development, February 21, 2013

**Title:** An act relating to de facto changes in water rights for irrigation purposes that involved conversion to more efficient irrigation technologies.

**Brief Description:** Concerning de facto changes in water rights for irrigation purposes that involved conversion to more efficient irrigation technologies.

**Sponsors:** Senators Ericksen and Holmquist Newbry.

**Brief History:**

**Committee Activity:** Agriculture, Water & Rural Economic Development: 1/29/13, 2/21/13 [DPS-WM].

---

### SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, WATER & RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

**Majority Report:** That Substitute Senate Bill No. 5199 be substituted therefor, and the substitute bill do pass and be referred to Committee on Ways & Means.

Signed by Senators Hatfield, Chair; Honeyford, Ranking Member; Brown, Eide, Hobbs, Schoesler and Shin.

**Staff:** Bob Lee (786-7404)

**Background:** A water right is appurtenant to the land on which it is used. Generally, water rights specify a place of use, purpose of use, and a point of diversion.

Water right transfer laws were first enacted in 1917 and allowed for a process for requesting a change in place of use, purpose of use, or point of diversion, subject to approval of the designated agency. A transferred water right retains its original priority date.

Prior to 1997, the law allowed a water right to be transferred to another use if such change could be made without detriment or injury to existing rights. Generally, a water right to irrigate land includes a description of the land to be irrigated. A change in or expansion of the area requires approval of the Department of Ecology (Ecology).

---

*This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.*

In 1997, the statute was amended to allow a change in the place of use, point of diversion, and/or purpose of use to enable irrigation of additional acreage or the addition of new uses if such change results in no increase in the annual consumptive quantity of water used. Annual consumptive quantity was defined as the estimated annual amount of water diverted, reduced by the estimated annual amount of return flow, averaged over the most recent five-year period of continuous use.

In 2001, this provision was modified to base the calculation on the two years of greatest use within the most recent five-year period of continuous use.

Under the general water right relinquishment statute enacted in 1967, if all or a portion of a water right is not beneficially used for a period of five consecutive years, the unused portion is relinquished to the state and becomes available for appropriation. There are a number of types of water rights that are exempt from relinquishment provisions.

**Summary of Bill (Recommended Substitute):** Ecology must initiate a pilot project in the Nooksack Basin to allow water rights to be modified for use by micro-efficient irrigation methods. Water right holders are allowed to correct the status of their water rights currently being used for a different place or purpose than indicated on the associated water right certificate when:

- the holder has implemented the requested change but has not yet received approval from Ecology;
- the change enabled the conversion to more efficient micro-irrigation technology without losing a portion of the water right;
- the water right has been beneficially used by micro-irrigation since implementing the change of use; and
- after implementing the change, but before the effective date of this section, the water right holder filed a water right change application for a new water right.

The information that water right holders must submit to Ecology is listed. If the information provided satisfies the requirements, Ecology must amend the appropriate water right certificates. Ecology must use the time period prior to the change to a micro-irrigation system to determine beneficial and consumptive use of the water right.

The coordinated cost-reimbursement process may be used to pay for the processing of water right change applications.

Ecology must to submit a report on this program by October 31, 2015.

The section expires on June 30, 2016.

**EFFECT OF CHANGES MADE BY AGRICULTURE, WATER & RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE (Recommended Substitute):** The substitute limits the bill to a single basin instead of the entire state. Establishes that the basin pilot project expires on June 30, 2016.

**Appropriation:** None.

**Fiscal Note:** Available.

**Committee/Commission/Task Force Created:** None

**Effective Date:** Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

**Staff Summary of Public Testimony on Original Bill:** PRO: The bill is about preserving jobs and maintaining the raspberry and blueberry industries. Farmers have been innovative and have switched to micro-irrigation technology so they could produce more berries with the same water. The purpose of the bill is to get these people right in the eyes of the law as they did not submit a water right change application. The state should incentivize conservation rather than penalize it.

CON: There is concern about going back in time and how the impairment analysis is done. There has been concern about how spreading water may increase consumptive use.

OTHER: There is support for the policy to reward more efficient applications. Ecology has a de facto change policy in place that covers unauthorized changes. One concern is that changes will impair existing water right holders.

**Persons Testifying:** PRO: Senator Ericksen, prime sponsor; John Stuhlmiller, WA Farm Bureau; Bill Clarke, Whatcom Farm Friends.

CON: Bruce Wishart, Center for Environmental Law and Policy; Darcy Nonemacher, WA Environmental Council.

OTHER: Jack Field, WA Cattlemen's Assn.; Maia Bellon, Ecology; Dawn Vyvyan, Yakama Nation.