

# Spreading in Washington State

**Q. What is spreading?**

**A.** Spreading refers to increasing the authorized number of acres of a water right. Before 1997, acres were a limiting attribute of water rights, and could not be changed. The Legislature changed the law in 1997 to allow acres to be increased.

**Q. How can a farmer apply to increase the number of acres authorized by their water right?**

**A.** A change application can be filed directly with the Department of Ecology or with a local county Water Conservancy Board.

**Q. What does Ecology or a conservancy board evaluate in an application to spread acres to new land?**

**A.** Ecology or the Conservancy Board will consider whether the water right being changed is valid, and whether consumptive use will increase after the change.

**Q. How is water right validity evaluated?**

**A.** Aerial photos, crop production records, and power or water meter data, pump run-times, and other water use data are all used to establish historic water use under a water right. Then historic water use is compared to the water right authorization, as well as whether any exemptions to relinquishment might excuse under-use of the water right, in determining the extent and validity of the water right.

**Q. What is consumptive use in a spreading application?**

**A.** Consumptive use refers to evapotranspiration by the crop and a portion of the additional water applied by irrigation systems (e.g. drip, microspray, sprinklers).

**Q. How is consumptive use calculated?**

**A.** The Legislature adopted a complex calculation method in RCW 90.03.380 and RCW 90.03.615 to calculate consumptive use. Although exceptions exist, in general an average of the highest two years within the most recent five years is used to calculate consumptive use.

**Q. What sources of information are used to estimate consumptive use?**

**A.** Ecology and Boards rely on the Washington Irrigation Guide, AgriMet, AgWeatherNet, and other estimates of evapotranspiration, along with guidance documents they have adopted, to estimate consumptive use.

**Q. How can I find out more information about spreading?**

**A.** Aspect Consulting assists farmers with changing water rights to add additional acres. This is typically most successful when crops are changing (e.g. apples to grapes) but can also be effective when farmers are changing irrigation equipment to more efficient systems. Please contact Dan Haller at [dhaller@aspectconsulting.com](mailto:dhaller@aspectconsulting.com) or 509.895.5462 for more information.