



State Engineer's Office

MATTHEW H. MEAD
GOVERNOR

PATRICK T. TYRRELL
STATE ENGINEER

HERSCHLER BUILDING, 4-E CHEYENNE, WYOMING 82002
(307) 777-6150 FAX (307) 777-5898

STATE ENGINEER'S OFFICE
Herschler Building, 4th Floor East
Cheyenne, WY 82002
Ph. 307.777.6150
Fax 307.777.5898

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Contact: State Engineer's Office
Patrick T. Tyrrell, State Engineer
Office 307.777.6150

On Friday, September 5, 2015 in Worland, District Court Judge Robert Skar signed the final documents related to the closing of the Big Horn General Adjudication lawsuit. The three decrees signed include one on records retention, one closing the Phase III portion of the general adjudication, and the final overall Big Horn decree. While appeals of various aspects of Friday's actions may come forth, the final decree signals a close to some 37 years of litigation and adjudication efforts.

Phase I of the case dealt with the quantification of Tribal Awards on the Wind River Indian Reservation. In total, those awards included approximately 290,000 acre-feet for presently or historically irrigated lands, and 209,000 acre-feet of "futures" awards for five identified but yet-to-be-constructed irrigation projects. All Phase I awards were given a priority date of July 3, 1868, and comprise now the most senior rights in Division III. With irrigated agriculture as the primary use for Tribal awards, the court also recognized subsumed uses including stock, domestic, municipal and commercial purposes. Phase II of the case adjudicated other federal non-tribal rights, such as those used on national forests and BLM lands. The Phase II reserved rights have priorities that range from dating back to the creation of the Shoshone and Big Horn National Forests to as recent as 1982-1983. Phase III included adjudication of state water rights of various priorities that were unadjudicated as of 1984. Included in Phase III was adjudication of over 4,600 surface water permits, including permit 7300 serving Midvale, Riverton Valley, and LeClair Irrigation Districts. Permit 7300 is the single largest direct flow permit in the State of Wyoming. In addition, Phase III also included numerous groundwater rights.

"The case took so long because of its sheer size," noted State Engineer Pat Tyrrell. "Between the three phases, the adjudication efforts needed for roughly a quarter of the state, and awaiting the outcome of seven Wyoming Supreme Court decisions, it simply couldn't occur much quicker. A similar general adjudication of the Snake River Basin in Idaho took about the same amount of time, and they are just finishing up too."

Surface Water
(307) 777-6475

Ground Water
(307) 777-6163

Board of Control
(307) 777-6178

Tyrrell also indicated that a number of positive things come from the process and the final decree. “All state water rights in the Wind/Big Horn River system with priority dates of 1984 and earlier, if not adjudicated by that time, now are. That’s a big deal. This is the only water division in the state having gone through a full general adjudication, so its records have been largely cleaned up. Likewise, the priority and quantity of all federal tribal and non-tribal rights are now known. The uncertainty over what comprised these rights has been removed.”

Looking forward, the final decree means that adjudications formerly sent to the district court for interlocutory decisions will now revert to the more traditional Board of Control evaluation and adjudication. Changes in existing rights and awards will also go before the Board. In performing necessary administrative functions post-decree, the State Engineer’s Office will continue to manage water in cooperation with the office of the Tribal Water Engineer.