



BENTON COUNTY

2024 STATE LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

FUNDING REQUESTS

- **Columbia Valley Center for Recovery:** Benton County continues its years long work to establish what will be southeastern Washington's primary substance abuse and mental health recovery center in Kennewick. The County requests continued State support in getting this project to and over the finish line in the amount of **\$1,500,000**.
- **Microwave Radio System Replacement:** This aging emergency management communications system is operated by Benton County Emergency Services under the auspices of the City of Richland. Benton County supports the community's request for State funding, leveraged by other funds already in-hand, for full replacement of this critical emergency response infrastructure.

ADDRESSING HARASSMENT OF ELECTIONS OFFICIALS

Threats to the safety of election workers have impacted the ability of local election offices to retain and recruit. In 2022, the legislature made cyber harassment of election officials a Class C felony. However, this legislation failed to equally penalize other means of threat officials are facing, such as written and mailed threats, and in-person stalking and harassment, which remain misdemeanors. The Washington State Association of County Auditors (WSACA) are joined by all WACO members in seeking legislation to create parity in penalties for all forms of harassment of election officials (**SHB 1241**).

SIMPLIFYING VOTER CHANGE OF ADDRESS

Washington has a fully connected statewide voter registration system. However, an outdated state law regarding how voter records can be updated is a barrier to it operating the registration system as intended. Minor changes in state law would streamline the process of updating voter registration records, making voter rolls more accurate and voter participation easier at a cost savings to counties (**HB 1962**).

- Allow voters to be transferred between counties using National Change of Address (NCOA) data maintained by the U.S. Post Office and/or Election Registration Information Center (ERIC) data governed by the association of state election officials.
- Allow voters to transfer their records between counties via phone call or email, instead of requiring submission of a new voter registration form.

CLEAN NUCLEAR ENERGY MANUFACTURING

Similar to the goals of TUAs, and as the state's bell cow nuclear power community, Benton County supports **HB 1981** relating to incentivizing clean nuclear energy manufacturing through preferential business and occupation tax rates which will further the Legislature's goal of advancing Washington state as a national and worldwide leader in clean energy technology.

STATE WATER BANKING PROGRAM

In 2021, the Legislature provided \$14 million in funding to buy water for development of water banks in rural *headwater* counties. In 2023, the Legislature reappropriated unspent funds, and now up to \$11.3 million is available for eligible water banking projects. This funding will help public entities and their partners preserve water rights in their basin for local use and to protect instream flows. Benton County is requesting the expansion of the Water Banking Program to include Benton County and other downstream, non-headwater counties which would allow the counties to participate in the Program and to further assist in preserving water rights in the State.

ENERGY FACILITY SITING & PROTECTION OF LAND USE AND WATER SUPPLY

The State's process for permitting large energy production projects has taken a high profile in the public discourse throughout Eastern Washington and in Benton County in particular. Maintaining adequate water supply and ensuring the continuity of the agricultural industry are essential to the economic and cultural vitality of the Yakima Basin and Tri-Cities areas. Our region continues to attract interest for large energy projects. As these projects are considered, the County asks that the Legislature provide adequate protections to ensure that potential projects do not impede public safety, quality of life, and existing land and water uses. Specifically, the County supports two bills and a study addressing the siting of new energy production projects:

- **Requirement for Aerial Firefighting Considerations:** Benton County also supports [HB 2117](#) that would require the Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council ("EFSEC") and other authorities to address aerial firefighting aspects and impacts as part of energy facilities permitting processes for communities at risk of wildfires.
- **Requirement for Secured Water Rights before Project Approval:** Currently, renewable energy projects may be approved by EFSEC without needed water rights having been secured. Benton County supports [HB 2042 \(SB 5992\)](#), amending RCW 80.50.060 to require evidence of adequate water rights to support a project *before* it is approved.
- **Cumulative Agricultural Impacts Study:** Benton County supports adding \$500,000 to the Operating budget to assess the cumulative impacts on existing agriculture lands from proposed and completed renewable energy projects sited by authority of EFSEC.

TARGETED URBAN AREAS

Benton County, specifically in the city of Richland, is the first area in the state where the new Targeted Urban Area ("TUA") tax abatement recruitment tool is being utilized. TUAs are made possible by RCW 84.25. The first applications of TUAs are revealing the needs for some minor legislative fixes.

FINANCIAL EDUCATION PREREQUISITES

Benton County supports [HB 1915 \(SB 5819\)](#) which would make basic financial education a required component of public education with tiered instruction curricula for elementary, middle, and high school.

DESIGNATING A STATE CACTUS

Supporting [SB 5698](#) that would designate the **Columbia Basin Hedgehog cactus** (*Pediocactus nigrispinus*) as the official cactus of the state of Washington. The action further recognizes Eastern Washington flora, and draws attention the little known fact that we actually have multiple species of cactus in Washington state.

SUPPORT OF PARTNER PRIORITIES

Benton County supports the legislative priorities of the Yakima Basin Integrated Plan ("YBIP"), Salmon Recovery Funding Board ("SRF Board"), the Washington Invasive Species Council ("WISC"), the Washington State Association of Counties ("WSAC"), and the Washington Association of County Officials (WACO). More specifically for 2024, Benton County supports:

- Consistency in Standards for Voters' Pamphlets – Create consistent standards and practices statewide.
 - Reinstating Overpayment Refund Threshold – Address unintentional elimination of \$10 minimum threshold for refunding payments made to court within the 2022 Uniform Unclaimed Property Act.
 - Publication of Notice of Dependency – Transfer the responsibility of publication to the State to align with its responsibility for notifying parents of pending parental rights court actions.
 - Supplemental Funding to WDNR for European Green Crab Management – EGC is a highly destructive species that has found its way into Washington waters that needs serious attention.
-