

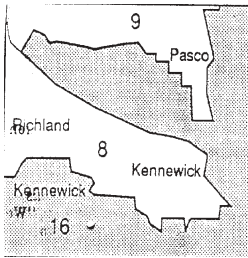
Alligator's bite slices Tri-Cities

Taken simply as a line drawing, the 16th Legislative District of the state of Washington, where it maneuvers around the Tri-Cities, looks pretty much like an alligator.

It appears to be an alligator with wide-opened jaws, about to nip off a piece of the 8th District, as though the 8th were a toe shoved invitingly down its throat.

Appearances are deceiving, of course, but the unhandsome image plays more than a fanciful part in our lives here.

In the most recent primary and election for the state Legislature, workers at pools covering parts of south Kennewick were deluged by voters wanting to know why they couldn't "vote for Shirley" or demanding instructions for "writing in that guy Curt Ludwig on the ballot."



The voters were confused. They didn't even know who represented them in

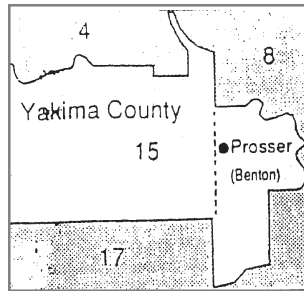
Olympia. But it was not their fault.

The 16th District takes all of Walla Walla County—and gets most of its votes from there. It also takes about half of Franklin County and a third of Benton, where it nibbles along the fringes of Kennewick and Richland.

These residents (and voters) were battered with the biggest election campaign seen for years and then got a chance to vote for people who some of them barely knew. (Not that that was the candidates' fault. The Tri-Cities have generally been well served by legislators whose districts include even small pieces of our counties.)

This is not the only Eastern Washington district that has screwy lines. Voters in Prosser, the Benton County seat, also were denied a chance to vote in the race between Shirley Hankins and Jim Jesnig or even in the 16th District races where south Kennewick and Richland residents did. Prosser and environs are represented in Olympia by senators and representatives from the 15th District—Yakima. Of course those legislators are attentive to the concerns of Prosser, but certainly they cannot be expected to be as receptive as they are to calls from Yakima, where the real votes are.

The 9th District takes the half of Franklin County that the 16th didn't get—plus all of Whitman, Garfield, Columbia and Asotin counties. Those north and west Franklin voters share their legislators with five other counties, meaning they have very diluted political strength at best.



It is no criticism of any of the legislators from the 9th, 15th or 16th Districts to say that voters in Benton and Franklin counties deserve a little more clarity in their selection. As the State Redistricting Commission settles

down to its task of squaring the lines with the 1990 census, they must carve out a new 9th Congressional District and reassess all the existing state legislative districts.

The commission is drawn entirely from west of the Cascades, so it is going to be a challenge for us in Eastern Washington to make it known that we want some cleaning up of our district lines, too.

But this is a task that really needs to be done.

A good starting point would be for the commission to decide that:

- Benton County lines would enclose two districts instead of one and minor elements of two others as it does now—if the numbers make such a decision possible.
- Franklin County would be made a unified whole as part of one legislative district, rather than be divided between two as it is now.

It makes no sense for those seeking office to find pockets of voters whose interests they represent but whose votes are denied them. It makes no sense for politicians who have a lock on their hometown voters to make "duty" treks to the Tri-Cities or Prosser every couple of years. It makes no sense for legislative candidates who live in the Tri-Cities to be guaranteed also-rans in any contests for 9th, 15th or 16th District races.

Generally speaking, we have received good representation from the 9th, 15th and 16th Districts, as we have from the 8th. But we have our special concerns in Benton and Franklin counties and we deserve having our own people speak for us.

The alligator ought to be pushed back into his own backyard.