

Focus on: Nutrient General Permit Process



Why it matters

The Puget Sound Nutrient General Permit is a crucial step in reducing human sources of nutrients to protect Puget Sound. [Technologies used to reduce nutrients](#) may also reduce some toxins.

The general permit has multiple benefits for protecting water quality in the Puget Sound and will help the estuary get closer to meeting water quality standards for dissolved oxygen.

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Nutrients are a problem in Puget Sound

Excess nutrients, particularly nitrogen, from domestic wastewater treatment plants (WWTPs) are contributing to dissolved oxygen impairments in Puget Sound, stressing aquatic life, and increasing the threat of algal blooms and fish kills. Many parts of Puget Sound have oxygen levels below what marine life needs to thrive and do not meet water quality standards. State and federal law requires Ecology and local municipalities to enhance WWTPs to remove excess nutrients.

General permit - best tool for controlling nutrients

Ecology received feedback on whether to use individual permits or a general permit to control nutrients. In January 2020, we chose a Nutrient General Permit as the tool to implement legal mandates necessary to address nutrients from the 58 publicly-owned domestic WWTPs that discharge to Puget Sound. The general permit:

- Creates a single coordinated public engagement process, allows flexibility for communities to collectively address nutrients, and provides a foundation for a potential trading program.
- Places WWTPs on a shared schedule, rather than staggered permit reissuance schedules for individual permits.
- Creates an opportunity to develop consistent facility data by aligning monitoring requirements for permittees.
- Allows us to review available science and data, permit compliance, and invite public input every five years when the permit is reissued.

Controlling nutrients by planning for the future

On Dec. 1, 2021, we issued the Puget Sound Nutrient General Permit. Effective Jan. 1, 2022, we are requiring treatment plants to:

- **Monitor** wastewater for nutrient reductions and collect data
- **Optimize** current treatment processes to remove as much nitrogen as possible through adaptive management
- **Plan** for future facility upgrades to control nutrients

We must require facilities to do what is possible to control nutrients at current levels while accommodating growth until they construct upgrades. Several options exist, including optimizing current infrastructure and evaluating additional treatment technologies, and investigating “outside the fence” solutions like reclaimed water and source control. Communities have options on how to reach the nutrient reduction targets.

To support treatment plant optimization and future planning, we established a grant program for the municipalities under the permit. Applications for the [Puget Sound Nutrient Reduction Grants Program](#) opened on Sept. 30, 2021 and close on March 1, 2022.

Engaging with Interested Parties

Community engagement is critical to building an effective and practical general permit. We worked with communities in several ways throughout the process as we developed and issued this first permit (see diagram below). We held multiple opportunities for public comment and received over 2,000 comments on the formal draft. In addition, an Advisory Committee provided initial recommendations to Ecology early in the development process. We will update the permit every five years and continue to prioritize engagement opportunities.

General Permit Advisory Committee

The General Permit Advisory Committee developed recommendations for permit conditions. The Committee included regional WWTP representatives, State Agencies (including Ecology and Commerce), the U.S. EPA, and the environmental community. Committee members brought a diverse array of concerns to the table: from salmon and orca recovery, to planning for smart growth, to costs to ratepayers, and all share a common commitment to ensuring a healthy Puget Sound. The Committee’s recommendations, while not unanimous, helped inform our draft of permit requirements.

Puget Sound Nutrient Source Reduction Project

We are working to address all human sources of excess nutrients in Puget Sound. Since 2018, the Nutrient Forum, a group of stakeholders and Tribes, has met regularly to discuss, learn, and provide input on how to reduce human sources of nutrients. The Nutrient General Permit is one part of addressing excess nutrients in Puget Sound.

The Nutrient Forum continues to be the space for addressing science, watershed sources of nutrients, nutrient reduction strategies, and other broader nutrient issues. Learn more about this work at ecology.wa.gov/reducingnutrients.

To stay informed about the Nutrient General Permit, please sign up for our [permit email list](#).

For information on upcoming forums, please sign up for the [Nutrient Forum email list](#).

General Permit Development Process

