



Focus

Salmon Creek water cleanup planning update

Issue

Clark County, the fastest growing county in the state, faces major water quality challenges in the Salmon Creek watershed.

The creek and its tributaries are located entirely within Clark County, northeast of Vancouver. Salmon Creek flows from the foothills of the Cascade Mountains through a mixture of small towns, small and large farms, pasture and homes. Near the end of its journey, it meanders through a highly urbanized, developed area of Clark County and then west to Lake River, which flows into the Columbia.

Water quality problems at Salmon Creek

A study by the state Department of Ecology (Ecology) has found significant violations of water quality standards in Salmon Creek for fecal coliform, turbidity, temperature and dissolved oxygen.

Fecal coliform is a major concern because it indicates that biological waste is entering the river. Common sources of fecal coliform are failing septic tanks and agricultural waste.

Turbidity is a measure of the ability of light to enter the water and indicates suspended solids. Turbid water impairs the ability of fish to survive and spawn. It also degrades habitat needed for aquatic insects that fish eat. Turbid water is sometimes caused by runoff from uncontained construction sites and washouts due to natural and human causes.

Temperature is important because proper temperatures boosts aquatic life. Cool temperatures help water hold dissolved oxygen, a critical requirement for aquatic life. Lack of shade-bearing trees is one reason for increased water temperatures and declining water quality in Salmon Creek.

Federal law requires cleanup of polluted waters

Federal law requires states to identify sources of pollution in waters that fall short of water quality standards and to determine how much of each kind of pollution the waters can receive and still remain healthy. A set of pollutant allocations for that water body, based on sampling data and computer modeling, is called a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL), or water cleanup plan.

Ecology is in the process of completing a water quality cleanup plan for Salmon Creek because it was listed, along with about 600 other polluted waters across Washington, for cleanup planning. After broad participation by local authorities and citizens, Ecology will submit to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) its water cleanup plan for Salmon Creek.

Salmon Creek pollution problems have many roots

There is no single source of pollution to Salmon Creek. Ecology experts believe that “non-point” pollution is to blame for the basin’s water quality dilemma. “Non-point” pollution is pollution that is caused by people and their activities. It is pollution that is not discharged through a pipe or an outfall (point pollution). Non-point pollution is sometimes invisible. It comes from failing septic tanks,

from farm animal waste that gets into rivers, from sediments that run off construction sites, from stormwater that races to the creek from rooftops, and from driveways, roads, and fertilizer-laden lawns. It comes from people washing their cars in their driveways and from people dumping the contents of paint buckets in ditches and storm drains.

Non-point pollution is worsened with growth. More houses and pavement, and a loss of stream-side trees and wetlands blocks water that would normally go back into the ground. This water has no place to go and it carries with it extensive pollution to the creek.

What happens because of poor water quality

Clean, cool water is important for people and for fish. A dirty creek can be a health threat to people who live near it and want to enjoy it. If left unchecked, it could even decrease property values. Fish have trouble surviving and spawning in a dirty creek. Federal Endangered Species Act listings are sparking actions by local government to clean up waters such as Salmon Creek and restore fish habitat, or face measures imposed by the federal government.

Cleaning up Salmon Creek

Stormwater improvements planned by Clark County will go a long ways to help block large sources of pollution that are entering Salmon Creek. Stream restoration programs by Clark Public Utilities are also helping water quality in Salmon Creek. But, it will take voluntary help from all who live in the Salmon Creek watershed to clean up its waters for current and future generations.

Ecology's Salmon Creek Nonpoint Source Pollution TMDL findings include:

- The presence of fecal coliform bacteria is the most significant water-quality problem in the Salmon Creek drainage. Other water-quality problems include turbidity, nutrients, temperature and low-dissolved oxygen. All are caused by land-use and stream-corridor disturbances.
- An increase in stream shading in the lower reaches of Salmon Creek will help reduce water temperatures and will help stabilize banks.
- It will require wide participation and funding to organize watershed management activities in the basin. Ecology will help target grant funds and other resources to assist in this.
- Follow-up monitoring will be important to measure the effectiveness of pollution- control measures in the drainage.
- Water quantity and water-use allocations should be closely monitored to make sure that a safe level of minimum flows can be maintained for all beneficial uses for people and for fish in the basin.

How you can get involved

Ecology is working with local interests to develop a framework for improving water quality in the Salmon Creek watershed. Ecology wants to hear from people who live in the watershed to involve the public in the development of the final cleanup plan.

The report on the water quality study for Salmon Creek is available at the Battleground Public Library at 12 West Main Street, Battleground, WA 98604 and at the Fort Vancouver Library at 1007 East Mill Plain Vancouver, WA 98663. It is also available on Ecology's web page at <http://www.wa.gov/ecology/biblio/95355.html>

During April there will be a public comment period on the Technical Study and Summary Implementation Strategy (SIS). After a responsive summary to comments is prepared, interested parties will be given a chance to approve the revised SIS.

A public meeting to discuss Salmon Creek water cleanup planning is planned for early this spring. The public will be invited to provide help and assistance in developing the water cleanup plan.

For more information

For more information or to be placed on Ecology's mailing list to receive information about Salmon Creek, contact Dave Howard, Department of Ecology, Vancouver Field Office, 2108 Grand Boulevard, Vancouver, WA 98661-4622; telephone: 360-690-4796; e-mail: dhow461@ecy.wa.gov.