

## Water Quality in Snohomish County Cleaning up bacteria in Snohomish River tributaries

### Issue



As one of the fastest growing counties in Washington, Snohomish County faces many water quality challenges. The Snohomish River, which flows from the confluence of the Skykomish and Snoqualmie rivers near Monroe to the Puget Sound at Everett, has not been meeting state water quality standards. In 1999, the Department of Ecology (Ecology) developed a “Water Cleanup Plan” for the Snohomish River to meet and stay within mandated water quality standards. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) approved this plan. However, in order for the river to meet water quality standards, Ecology must also develop a cleanup plan for the tributaries of the Snohomish River — Quilceda, Allen, Woods and French creeks, the Marshlands and Pilchuck River.

Based on historical data compiled by Snohomish County and the Tulalip Indian Tribe, Ecology launched a water quality study of the tributaries in 1997. The study concluded that these streams and rivers failed to meet state water quality standards for fecal coliform bacteria and dissolved oxygen. Clean, cool water is important for both people and fish. A polluted creek can have an impact on fish and be a threat human health. In addition, important fish species such as salmon have trouble surviving and spawning in a dirty creek. The federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) listings for salmon and other fish species are sparking actions by local government to clean up local waters and restore fish habitat, or face measures imposed by the federal government.

### What is a ‘Water Cleanup Plan?’

The federal Clean Water Act requires states to conduct statewide water quality assessments to identify and list surface waters that do not meet water quality standards. Each state establishes maximum limits on the amounts of a pollutant that can be discharged to a specific water body under its jurisdiction and still meet water quality standards. These limits, called Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs), become the Water Cleanup Plan for each water body. Each cleanup plan is developed by a workgroup representing local, state and tribal governments, businesses, landowners and other interested parties.

Ecology will be submitting a Water Cleanup Plan for Snohomish River tributaries to EPA later this year. To aid in the development of this plan, Ecology is currently soliciting comments from local governments, tribes and interested citizens.

## **Nonpoint pollution**

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Nonpoint pollution refers to pollution that comes from many diverse sources — most of which are associated with people and their activities. For example, storm water washes pet wastes, lawn fertilizers and auto fluids into local streams. The primary sources of nonpoint fecal coliform bacteria water pollution include poor farm management practices, hobby farms, dairies, kennels and pet wastes, failing on-site septic systems and waterfowl. The development of a Water Cleanup Plan for the Snohomish River tributaries will identify and prioritize pollution sources and establish a plan to control nonpoint pollution sources.

## **1997 water quality study findings**

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The 1997 water quality assessment used data collected by Ecology and Snohomish County which confirmed that Quilceda, Allen, French and Woods creeks, the Marshlands, and parts of the Pilchuck River violate state water quality standards for fecal coliform bacteria. These violations are more extensive during the dry season, May through October. Violations of dissolved oxygen criteria also occur during the dry season in Quilceda, Allen and French creeks and the Marshlands. Targeting fecal coliform bacteria for control will also help manage other water quality concerns such as dissolved oxygen and nutrients.

The study found that it is likely that water quality problems in these water bodies are related to land use and stream corridor issues. The assessment also determined that water quality in all of the study basins is being adversely impacted by nonpoint sources of pollution. The study recommends that a phased implementation approach will be the most effective strategy, which will then require follow-up monitoring to determine the effectiveness of the control measures.

## **Get involved: Upcoming workshop on May 16**

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On May 16, Ecology will conduct a workshop in Everett to present and receive public comment on the 1997 water quality study as well as gather input regarding how pollution ought to be reduced to improve water quality for the Snohomish River tributaries. The workshop will start at 6 p.m. at the following location:

**Snohomish County PUD  
Commission Meeting Room  
2320 California St.  
Everett, WA**

For more information about the upcoming workshop or to receive a copy of the 1997 Snohomish River tributaries water quality assessment, please contact Ecology's Robert Wright at (425) 649-7060 (e-mail: [rowr461@ecy.wa.gov](mailto:rowr461@ecy.wa.gov)). TTY for Hearing Impaired: (425) 649-4259. You can also electronically access a summary of the report from Ecology's web site (<http://www.wa.gov.ecology/biblio/97334.html>).

Written comments will be accepted until May 31. They should be addressed to:

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