



# Focus

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## Grays Harbor watershed cleanup planning

### Background

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The Washington Department of Ecology (Ecology) is seeking assistance from citizens, industry and local government to help solve water-quality problems in the Grays Harbor watershed. It will take voluntary help from many who live and work in the community to clean up these waters for current and future generations.

Parts of the Grays Harbor watershed have a long history of pollution problems with fecal coliform bacteria, dissolved oxygen, temperature and toxic pollutants. Although Ecology has done considerable work in the Grays Harbor watershed, most of the work has focused on toxic contaminants, salmon survival, and on the major industrial dischargers in the area.

Ecology is now turning its attention to fecal coliform problems in the watershed in light of its just-released study that reveals significant fecal coliform pollution in Grays Harbor and tributaries to the upper and lower harbor. The tributaries include the Chehalis River from Porter downstream, the Wishkah, Humptulips, Satsop, and the Elk and Johns rivers in the south harbor area.

### The fecal coliform bacteria problem

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The presence of fecal coliform bacteria in water threatens public health. Health risks can be caused by exposure to the harmful bacteria through contact with the water while fishing, swimming or wading. In addition, consumption of shellfish contaminated with fecal coliform can cause health problems.

Shellfish growers in the outer harbor have had to deal with repeated temporary closures of harvest beds due to high levels of fecal coliform bacteria released in industrial wastewater. Ecology takes a strong interest in these kinds of industrial discharges because they violate permits, impair water quality and can lead to penalties. The shellfish closures caused by the discharges disrupt the commerce in the shellfish industry, impair the local image and local economy. Many residents believe that bacteria concentrations also degrade recreational and aesthetic values of the waters.

The good news is that industrial sources of this type of pollution are small, according to Ecology's study. The study indicates that 96 percent of fecal coliform in the Grays Harbor watershed is coming from "non-point" pollution. "Non-point" pollution comes mostly from people and their activities. It is pollution that is not necessarily discharged through a pipe or an outfall (called "point-source" pollution). Non-point pollution is sometimes invisible. It can result from failing pumping stations of sewage collection systems, failing home septic systems, flooding, animal-waste run-off from agricultural operations or areas used by wildlife.

All of this non-point pollution is carried downstream to Grays Harbor via eight tributaries, two urban drains and the mainstem Chehalis River.

## **Federal law requires cleanup of polluted waters**

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Federal law requires states to identify sources of pollution in waters that fall short of water quality standards, and to determine how much pollution the waters can receive and still remain healthy. This “allocation,” 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 developing a water cleanup plan for the Grays Harbor watershed. The watershed is listed, along with more than 600 other polluted waters across Washington, for cleanup planning.

After broad participation by local authorities and citizens, Ecology will submit a water cleanup plan for the Grays Harbor watershed to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

## **What happens because of poor water quality**

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Clean, cool water is important for people. It is also important for fish, wildlife and shellfish, which provide an irreplaceable recreational, tourist and economic activity to our state. That’s why it’s so important that we work together to make sure the water is clean. Federal Endangered Species Act listings are another big reason to clean up the river and harbor. If not, local communities could face greater restrictions posed by the federal government.

## **How you can get involved**

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Ecology will be working with local interests – including government, industries, interest groups and neighboring residents -- to develop a water cleanup plan that works for everybody. For it to be successful, Ecology needs to involve all affected groups in developing the plan.

Ecology is forming a broad-based work group representing these interests to help identify actions that local residents, land and livestock managers, and public entities can take to improve water quality in the Grays Harbor watershed.

## **For more information**

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If you’re interested in serving on the work group, would like more information, or would like to receive mailings about this effort, contact Dave Rountry, Department of Ecology, P.O. Box 47775, Olympia, WA 98504-7775. Phone 360-407-6276. Email: [drou461@ecy.wa.gov](mailto:drou461@ecy.wa.gov).

To see a copy of Ecology’s Grays Harbor Fecal Coliform Total Maximum Daily Load Study, go to: <http://www.wa.gov/ecology/biblio/0003020.html>

To see a copy of appendices and animations, go to: <http://www.wa.gov/ecology/eils/wrias/tmdl/ghfc/results.html>

Hard copies of the Grays Harbor Fecal Coliform Total Maximum Daily Load Study are also available at Timberland libraries in Elma, Montesano, Aberdeen, Hoquiam, McCleary, Oakville, Centralia and Chehalis.

For general information about the Department of Ecology, visit our website at: <http://www.wa.gov/ecology/>