

## What is the problem?

Water pollution comes from a wide variety of sources. It is economically unfeasible to have pollution inspectors on every corner 24 hours a day; however, citizen reporting of pollution problems can go a long way toward filling the gaps in water quality protection.

## How Can Citizens Help?

Your observations can help federal, state, and local officials investigate, and prosecute if necessary, the polluting of local waters. By taking good notes and perhaps a picture or two, you can help local authorities respond to pollution when it is occurring.

## How will your information be used?

Local governments have different policies on how to respond to pollution events. Your information alerts local authorities and may lead to additional collection of evidence and possible enforcement. Most agencies consider technical assistance first before penalizing a polluter. All responses are considered on a case-by-case basis and generally consider:

- ◆ Past history of the violator;
- ◆ Impact on the environment; and
- ◆ Was the violation done knowingly?

Local authorities cannot promise that resources will be available to respond to all calls, but your information will be used to prioritize resources when such constraints exist.

## Mysterious!...but not dangerous.

There are a few “not-so-obvious” situations where natural conditions create what appear to be serious pollution problems.

Examples include:

- ◆ **Iron oxide discharges.** When oxygen poor, iron rich water surfaces, the iron becomes oxidized and much or all of a stream can turn orange in color. Chemical interactions with plants and other parts of the stream may cause iron to precipitate on aquatic plants or sometimes cover the entire streambed.
- ◆ **Foaming.** It is normal for some small creeks to have a small amount of foam. The foam is caused by nutrients and proteins and is not a pollution indicator. If you see handfuls of suds, it is probably not due to this natural cause.
- ◆ **Tannins and lignins.** These natural compounds are derived from leaves and other organic materials and turn water a deep brown tea-like color. Some healthy water bodies have this color due to the presence of deciduous leafy material or a peat bog upstream.
- ◆ **Swimmer’s Itch.** An allergic reaction caused by a parasite shared by snails & waterfowl. It sometimes effects swimmers in Washington’s lakes and ponds. To avoid infection dry off immediately after leaving the water. Although swimmer’s itch is not dangerous it can be reported to your local health department.

## Where we need your help

Typical problems you can identify and report for further investigation include:

- ◆ **Emergency Situations.** A sudden threat to human health or the environment is an environmental emergency. Examples include a spill of raw sewage, chemical spill, or radioactive discharge. Because of the potential for the presence of hazardous gases and other serious threats, ***do not*** attempt to document an environmental emergency. Immediately report the location of the event to local authorities.
- ◆ **Erosion.** Wherever land clearing activities are taking place there is a potential for erosion. Erosion clogs streams and suffocates fish. If you see brown, sediment-laden water entering a ditch or stream, it should be reported.
- ◆ **Manure problems.** Farmers reapply manure as fertilizer during the growing season. If you observe manure being sprayed during winter months or overspray onto roadways or into local streams or ditches, report this. If you observe manure from equestrian facilities that appears to be polluting a creek, report this.
- ◆ **Oil or other spills.** Oil and other chemical spills can be hazardous for both people and fish. Be very careful in approaching these pollutants to ensure your personal health. The Washington State Department of Ecology and local Fire Departments should do any close investigations of these types of pollutants.

## The basics on reporting.

The following are good practices to follow for reporting a potential pollution problem and for providing information that will be helpful to the follow-up investigator.

### Take good notes:

A good set of notes will provide a complete and accurate set of facts for others. Use the following as a checklist when reporting a suspicious event:

- ◆ Location of observation.
- ◆ Time/date of your observation. Does it occur at a certain time? (e.g., everyday at 6:00 a.m.?)
- ◆ Could you determine the source?
- ◆ How did the water look?
- ◆ Did you observe any dead fish?
- ◆ Are there any odors?
- ◆ Were there other witnesses?

### Take photographs:

Photographic evidence can be very valuable in establishing the presence of pollution, especially where erosion problems exist.

When taking photographs, remember to record the time, date, and location that the photo was taken. Wherever possible, try to include an established landmark so that the location of the pollution problem cannot be challenged.

Digital photos are very helpful to investigators in understanding the location and severity of certain discharges

## About taking samples.

Because of the potential for personal injury from contact with dangerous chemicals or entry into unsafe environments, sample collection should be left to local authorities.

## Things to watch out for!

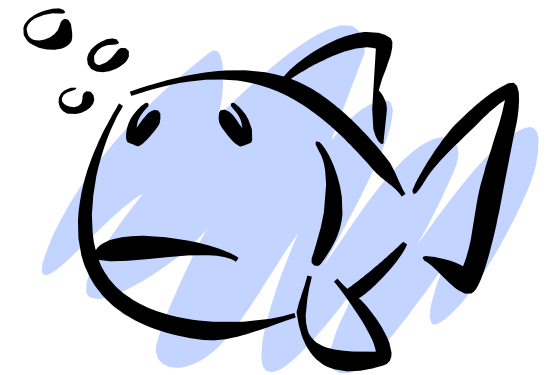
- ◆ Be careful, safety first, do not attempt anything dangerous
- ◆ Do not sample unknown liquids

## Contact list

The following is a list of contacts to report potential pollution problems. It is recommended that you contact the Department of Ecology Environmental Tracking System (ERTS) desk first.

- ◆ Department of Ecology 509-329-3400  
(24hr incident report number)
- ◆ County Health Departments:
  - ◆ Adams 509-659-3315
  - ◆ Asotin 509-758-3344
  - ◆ Benton-Franklin 509-943-2614
  - ◆ Columbia 509-382-2181
  - ◆ Garfield 509-843-3412
  - ◆ Grant 509-754-6060
  - ◆ Lincoln 509-725-1001
  - ◆ Spokane 509-324-1500
  - ◆ Walla Walla 509-527-3290
  - ◆ Whitman 509-397-6280
  - ◆ NE-Tri County 509-684-1301  
(Stevens, Ferry, Pend Oreille)
- ◆ Washington Dept. of Fish & Wildlife
  - ◆ Spokane 509-456-4082
  - ◆ Ephrata 509-754-4624
- ◆ Washington State Dept. of Natural Resources (for forestry practices)
  - ◆ Ellensburg 509-925-8510
  - ◆ Colville 509-684-7474

# Reporting Water Quality Problems



## A Citizen's Guide



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