



WASHINGTON STATE
DEPARTMENT OF
E C O L O G Y

Surface Water Quality Standards

Proposed Changes

The state's surface water quality standards set limits on pollution in our lakes, rivers and marine waters in order to protect beneficial uses, such as swimming and fishing. After a lengthy revision process, several important changes to the state's water quality standards are being proposed. The changes are based on new science, public feedback at statewide workshops, special work sessions, and new water quality data.

The Department of Ecology's current proposal is available on the Web at:
www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/swqs

What are the Proposed Changes to the Water Quality Standards?

Temperature Criteria

The existing temperature criteria for protecting aquatic life have been criticized as being too stringent by some and too lenient by others. These concerns led the Department of Ecology (Ecology) to conduct a detailed review of the temperature requirements of Washington's aquatic species. As a result of this review, Ecology is proposing to revise the existing temperature criteria. The new criteria are based on current scientific understanding of the effects of temperature on aquatic species. The criteria would apply to the following key species groupings: char (bull trout and Dolly Varden), salmon and coastal trout, eastern redband trout, and warm water fish.

Dissolved Oxygen Criteria

The existing state criteria were developed many years ago, and concerns have been raised that they may be out of date. As a result, Ecology has conducted a detailed review of the current technical literature and is now proposing revisions to the dissolved oxygen criteria. The criteria would be applied based on whether a water body is used for salmon and trout spawning, salmon and trout rearing, or as habitat for warm water fish.

Bacteria Criteria

The existing state criteria for bacteria use fecal coliform as an indicator. After careful analysis, Ecology is proposing to change to *E. coli* and enterococci to indicate the presence of pathogens in water. *E. coli* (proposed for fresh waters) and enterococci (proposed for marine waters) have been shown to be very effective indicators of the safety of water for human contact. They are consistent with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's recommendations. They also can be used to help ensure that waste water is properly disinfected before being discharged.

Irrigation Water Supply Criteria

The existing water quality standards include a narrative statement that says the quality of irrigation water supplies must be protected. However, there are no numeric criteria to ensure that protection occurs. Ecology proposes adding specific numeric criteria for conductivity, total suspended solids and bicarbonate to protect the use of water for irrigated agriculture.

Water Quality Antidegradation Plan

The existing water quality standards contain an antidegradation policy that is required by federal regulation. The proposed revisions clarify how beneficial uses (such as swimming, boating and fish habitat) are to be protected and the conditions under which water quality can be degraded. Also included is a process for designating water bodies having both exceptional water quality and public value for protection from all future sources of degradation.

Restructuring the Water Quality Standards

Ecology proposes to change the way it categorizes beneficial uses (such as swimming, boating and fish habitat). Uses are now assigned in pre-determined sets, or "classes." The proposed change is to reorganize the standards so that beneficial uses of water bodies can be assigned independently.

Next Steps

The Department of Ecology is now preparing to begin the formal part of the process for revising state regulations. The process includes holding public hearings around the state. The hearings and the associated written comment period serve as a crucial opportunity for the public to recommend changes to the proposal before it is adopted as the state's revised water quality standards.

Join the ListServ

If you have e-mail and would like to receive electronic updates on the revisions to the water quality standards, please send a message to swqs@ecy.wa.gov, with "Subscribe" as the subject. The ListServ provides periodic e-mail updates and news concerning water quality standards.

Publication Number 02-10-033
June 2002

The Department of Ecology is an equal-opportunity agency and does not discriminate on the basis of race, creed, color, disability, age, religion, national origin, sex, marital status, disabled-veteran's status, Vietnam-era veteran's status or sexual orientation. If you have special accommodation needs, contact Donna Lynch at (360) 407-7529 (voice) or (360) 407-6006 (TDD)

How do I learn more?

Please visit the water quality standards Web site for a comprehensive discussion of the proposed changes.

The Department of Ecology will be preparing rule language, focus sheets and lengthy technical documents on the issues being proposed. These documents will be available soon and can be obtained either by requesting paper copies or downloading them from the Department of Ecology's Web page at: www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/swqs.

To obtain paper copies of the focus sheets or technical documents, or to be added to the mailing list for water quality standards issues, contact Ann Kahler at (360) 407-6404.

The Department of Ecology will hold public hearings before adopting any of the proposed changes. Hearings currently are anticipated for the fall of 2002. If you have submitted your name to either our mailing list or our e-mail ListServ, we will notify you directly of the dates and locations of the public hearings.

If you have any comments or questions regarding these proposed changes, please contact:

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Phone: (360) 407-6477

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