



Focus on Finishing and using local watershed plans

from Ecology's Shorelands and Environmental Assistance Program

Background

With an increasing demand for water from a growing population and economy, it is becoming more crucial for the people living in each watershed to take a close look at the water they have available to them now — and how much they'll need in the future.

In 1998, the Washington Legislature approved the Watershed Planning Act, deciding that the best way to tackle water supply concerns, and even water quality and habitat concerns, was through local planning within each major watershed. The act creates a *voluntary* process and provides grant funding for citizens to come together to develop a plan for managing water resources in their local areas. Developing these plans is a three-phase process that is designed to:

- help local governments and organizations form planning units (phase I),
- pay for technical studies needed to determine the amount of water available for current and future uses (phase II), and
- develop a water management plan (phase III).

To date, the Legislature has provided more than \$20 million dollars to 45 of the state's 62 watersheds over the past five years.

The focus of the watershed planning process is to manage the available water in a way that meets everyone's needs while still maintaining river and stream flows that protect fish. How that is done is up to the local planning unit, with advice and comment from other citizens.

The plans must include strategies to provide water to meet the future needs of agriculture, energy production, and population and economic growth, as well as sufficient water for fish and habitat. These strategies may include establishing more water-storage facilities, creating ways to conserve water, and identifying ways to ensure water in rivers and streams is maintained at a level that sustains a healthy environment for fish.

What a watershed plan contains

Local watershed plans, by law, must address water quantity (supply) and **may** address water quality, habitat, and setting or revising a minimum stream flow sufficient to protect fish.

Water quantity

The governments that initiate the planning process need to address **water quantity**. This means estimating the amount of water available in the basin; the amount of water held in water-right permits, certificates, or claims; the amount of water actually being used; and the amount needed for future growth. Finally, the

watershed plan must include strategies to maintain stream flows for fish and maintain underground water for people.

Water quality & habitat

Governments that choose to study **water quality**, need to analyze water quality in the watershed, the sources of pollution or other water-quality problems, how bodies of water in the area are used, the effects of fresh water on saltwater quality, and whether cleanup/improvement plans (total maximum daily loads, or TMDLs) exist or are being established for local bodies of water. The watershed plan also must recommend steps to achieve water quality standards.

If the initiating governments choose to address **habitat**, the watershed plan needs to be written to protect or enhance fish habitat in the area. It must consider existing habitat-oriented programs, such as forest practices, growth-management plans, shoreline-management plans, and salmon-recovery plans.

In watersheds where habitat-restoration activities are developed to comply with salmon-recovery legislation of 1998, local watershed plans will recognize these as the primary non-regulatory habitat component for fish.

Stream flows

If a planning unit elects to set **stream flows**, they have four years from the time they received Phase 2 funds, to reach agreement on their flow recommendations. If they cannot reach agreement, then Ecology itself may adopt flows. Stream flows are set by adopting a state regulation with full public involvement.

How the watershed plan becomes final

If a planning unit approves its watershed plan by consensus, it is submitted to the county government for final review and approval. Since watershed and county boundaries do not always match up, more than one county may need to approve the plan. The plan must be submitted to the counties within four years of the date the planning unit first spends Phase 2 assessment funds. The legislative authorities of each of the counties (boards of commissioners) must hold at least one public hearing and then meet in a joint session to consider the plan.

If the watershed plan obligates a state agency, such as the department of Ecology or Fish and Wildlife, or a county government to any actions, that agency must adopt the actions by policy, procedure, agreement, ordinance, or regulation.

If the county officials do not approve the plan, it may be returned to the planning unit for revision. If agreement cannot be reached, the planning process will terminate.

Implementing an approved plan

Many watershed planning units across the state are well into the third stage of developing a plan, and some of the first plans have just been completed. The state Legislature, acknowledging the need to implement plans once they have been completed and approved, passed a bill during the 2003 session that authorizes a

fourth phase of planning – the “implementation phase” - and financial assistance to go along with it.

The 2003 law established a matching grant program of up to \$100,000 per year to each planning unit for three years. (A two-year extension is possible under some circumstances.) Planning units are required to provide a match of 10 percent to receive implementation funding. If they accept funding, the legislation requires planning units to develop a “detailed implementation plan” within one year.

The initial thinking about what, when, and how to implement the plan recommendations will be contained in the watershed plan. The details and specifics of exactly how this will be accomplished will be spelled out in the detailed implementation plan.

The law also requires that a detailed implementation plan contain recommendations to provide water to meet current and future needs of agriculture, industry, residents and stream flows. In addition, the implementation plan must not only specify who and what, it also must specify deadlines and interim milestones to achieve those strategies.

In areas where Ecology was involved in creating the watershed plan, the approved plan becomes the framework for future water-resource management decisions. The department may amend a plan only by entering into the formal, negotiated rulemaking process.

This document is available online at <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/biblio/0406002.html> If you require this document in alternative format, please contact Ecology's SEA Program at (360) 407-6096 (Voice) or 711 or 1-800-833-6388 (TTY).