



Focus on **Water Quality Standards**

from Ecology's Water Quality Program, Watershed Management Section

Final Changes to the Water Quality Standards

On July 1, 2003, the Washington Department of Ecology revised several key aspects of the state's surface water quality standards. This focus sheet provides an overview of the revisions.

Overview

The Department of Ecology has completed the first major overhaul of the state's water quality standards in a decade. The revised standards are intended to reflect the latest scientific information and incorporate new state and federal requirements – all aimed at making our waters clean and safe for people, fish and wildlife.

Why change the standards?

Washington'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. The last revision of the water quality standards took place in 1997; our scientific understanding about how best to protect the environment has vastly improved since then.

What were the key changes that were adopted?

Updates to the water quality standards achieve two important goals:

Pollution prevention. New approaches allow Washington State to set aside pristine waters when there is broad public support to do so. We also have new tools to prevent increased pollution of water bodies that are already meeting water quality standards and prohibit additional pollution of waters that violate water quality standards.

Protection of threatened fish species. Updated rules will assure that salmon and other temperature-sensitive fish, such as bull trout and Dolly Varden, are protected from temperatures that could harm their populations. Better targeting of temperature requirements will also lessen the impact on farmers and business.

We've also made some additional changes:

- We will be using a new indicator (enterococci) to measure the amount of bacteria in marine waters that are not used for shellfish harvesting. We also adopted new values for ammonia in waters without salmon species, in order to be consistent with EPA requirements.
- We will be classifying fresh waters by actual use (such as fish habitat, swimming and water supply), rather than by class (AA, A, B, C and Lake classes), to make the standards less complicated to interpret and provide future flexibility as the uses of a water body evolve. This change only affects fresh water; marine water will be addressed in the future.

- New language was added to allow dams to be certified as meeting water quality standards if they follow specific procedures.
- New language was added to make people aware that water quality standards can be modified under very specific situations where attaining the criteria is not feasible for physical or economic reasons.
- The rule was rewritten to incorporate “plain English” for greater understanding, and sections were added to allow people to more easily find information they need.

What happens now?

The new water quality standards were adopted by the state July 1, 2003. They were submitted to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on August 1, 2003. Federal regulations require that state water quality standards be reviewed and approved by the EPA to determine compliance with the federal rules. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) must also agree with EPA’s approval of the water quality standards. The new water quality standards will not take effect for projects that require federal action until this process is completed.

What other information is available on the final rule changes?

The final rule is available on the Ecology internet site, along with other related materials. A responsiveness summary is also available. Ecology has prepared the following documents as a part of the Administrative Procedures Act requirements:

- A cost benefit analysis
- A final environmental impact statement
- A least-burdensome alternative determination
- An implementation plan

How do I learn more?

To learn more about the final adopted water quality standards, visit our web site at www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/swqs. To receive electronic updates on the water quality standards, send an e-mail message to swqs@ecy.wa.gov, with “Subscribe” as the subject heading.