



Focus on Water Quality Improvement Plans

from Ecology's Water Quality Program

Also called Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs)

Why develop water quality improvement plans?

Clean water is vital for our quality of life – for both economic development and a healthy environment. Unfortunately, some water bodies are so badly polluted they need extra help. Total maximum daily loads (TMDLs), or water quality improvement plans, describe the type, amount, and sources of water pollution in a particular water body; analyze how much the pollution needs to be reduced to achieve clean water; and provide strategies to control pollution.

The federal Clean Water Act requires states to prepare a list of water bodies, called the 303d list, that do not meet standards. Water quality standards are set to ensure the water is healthy for such uses as fish and wildlife habitat, agricultural water supplies, and recreation in and on the water. All water bodies identified on the list must attain water quality standards within a reasonable period, either through a water quality improvement plan or other pollution control mechanisms.

What is the schedule for Washington's water quality plans?

As a result of a 1998 legal settlement agreement, the Department of Ecology (Ecology) has been given a deadline of 2013 to develop and implement plans to address about 650 polluted water bodies throughout the state. Ecology works with local governments, businesses, and citizens to develop solutions to improve water quality.

Who is responsible for implementation?

Ecology regulates point sources (pollution that generally comes out of a pipe or an activity that has a wastewater or stormwater permit) by placing limits on discharges. For pollution from nonpoint sources (pollution that comes from many smaller, diffuse sources), Ecology works with other agencies, local governments, landowners, and citizens to identify and implement specific pollution controls or "best management practices."

How is the improvement of waters progressing?

The 1998 settlement agreement established a schedule for completing the required water quality improvement plans by 2013. The schedule includes interim targets at five-year intervals. We achieved the first five-year target of 249 plans required by June 30, 2003.

However, the state is required to prepare a 303d list every 2 years which means that the list of polluted water bodies is growing longer. Ecology must eventually develop plans to improve the quality of all waters on that list.

We have learned a lot from the cleanup plans we've already done, and we are now implementing some new strategies because of what we've learned. These include addressing all pollutants in a watershed at one time, standardizing procedures and reports, and capitalizing on partnerships. In addition, future water quality improvement plans will benefit from working with existing committees and with entities that now have experience in the process. This experience should allow communities to move more quickly to take action to improve water quality. In any given year, Ecology is typically working on approximately 100 cleanup plans at various stages of development.

Is water quality improving?

There are many areas where we are seeing better water quality as a result of TMDLs. Some examples include reduced bacteria counts in the Chehalis River, Dungeness River watershed, Granger Drain, and the Skokomish and Stillaguamish rivers. Fish habitat improvements are resulting from implementation of the Simpson Timberlands temperature TMDL on the Olympic Peninsula. Local groups are hard at work maintaining the phosphorus levels in Lake Chelan. In addition, wastewater treatment plant upgrades, streamside plantings, pet-waste control, fencing, and culvert repairs are happening all over the state. We are pleased with these actions and are working to expand local involvement and the number of water bodies seeing improvements statewide

Best management practices at work through TMDLs



Before

Animals have access to the salmon stream.



After

TMDL work includes fencing the riparian area and restoring the stream banks with native vegetation.

Where will we begin working this year?

Each year, Ecology evaluates the need for water quality improvement plans in various parts of the state. Decisions on which plans are to be completed next are made with the help of local communities.

Water Quality Improvement Plan List for 2007

Regional Office	Primary Location	Waterbody(s) Name	Pollution Problems
NWRO	King County	Green River/Newaukum	Temperature
NWRO	King County	Fauntleroy Creek	Fecal Coliform (bacteria)
CRO	Yakima County	Yakima River	Toxics, pesticides, PCB
ERO	Garfield, Columbia Counties	Tucannon/Pataha Creeks	Temperature, Fecal Coliform (bacteria), pH, turbidity

Future considerations

Ecology is working with many local, state, and federal agencies to meet the water cleanup plan schedule and improve the health of Washington's waters. We are partnering with the EPA, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Navy, King County Department of Natural Resources, and numerous local governments to clean up specific water bodies of special interest to those agencies.

For more information, please contact:

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