



Focus on **Washington's** **Water Quality Assessment**

from Ecology's Water Quality Program

Washington's Water Quality Assessment, conducted every two years, is used to determine the health and quality of the state's waters and to develop the state's list of polluted waters, known as the 303(d) List.

Why is it important to assess the quality of Washington's waters?

The federal Clean Water Act, adopted in 1972, requires that all states restore their waters to be "fishable and swimmable." To do this, one of the tasks of the Washington Department of Ecology's Water Quality Program is to determine the quality of the state's waters and clean up waters that are polluted. Washington's citizens help with this important work in many ways — by observing and measuring conditions in local streams, by participating in local groups that develop and implement water cleanup plans, and by changing their daily activities to produce less pollution.

How do we identify and clean up polluted waters?

To achieve the Clean Water Act's goal, Washington established water quality standards to protect the beneficial uses of our lakes, rivers, and streams. These beneficial uses include drinking water, recreation, and habitat for fish and other aquatic life. The water quality standards address toxic chemicals, such as arsenic, and conventional pollution, such as bacteria. They also set limits on other conditions, such as the maximum temperature for a water body, because water that is too warm harms fish and other aquatic life.

Section 303(d) of the Clean Water Act requires all states to prepare a list of water bodies that do not meet water quality standards. This list is called the 303(d) List.

To develop the list, Ecology compiles its own water quality data and invites other groups to submit water quality data they have collected. Data sent to Ecology need to be collected using appropriate scientific methods. Once the list is put together, the public has a chance to review it and give comments. Ecology submits the final list to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which has the authority to approve or disapprove it. Once the list is approved, a water quality improvement plan, also known as a "total maximum daily load" or TMDL, must be developed for each of the water bodies on the list. The plan identifies how much pollution needs to be reduced or eliminated to achieve clean water.

What is the status of the Water Quality Assessment?

Washington's current Water Quality Assessment and 303(d) List (based on data collected by 2004) was approved by EPA in November 2005. Results of this assessment can be found on the Web site at: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/303d/2002/2002-index.html> .

Recently, Ecology went through a public process to update the guidance that we use to prepare the Water Quality Assessment. Policy 1-11 includes two chapters: one dealing with how waters get placed on the 303(d) list, and the other describing how the department uses credible data to make listing decisions. These two documents can be found on the Web site at:

http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/303d/2006/policy1-11_rev.html

In the fall of 2006, Ecology asked the public to submit water quality data to be used to develop the 2006 Water Quality Assessment. The resulting 2006 Water Quality Assessment will be available for public review sometime in spring 2007.

Why is the Water Quality Assessment so important?

The water quality assessment is important because it helps us focus our limited resources on water bodies that need the most work.

More importantly, the assessment's list of water bodies reflects local government, community, and citizen recognition of water quality problems in Washington. This is another indicator of citizen interest in, and commitment to, clean water. Local involvement in identifying and resolving water quality problems is critical. When citizens are involved in the process of assessing water quality, they will want to be involved in actions to improve water quality.

How do I learn more?

To learn more about the preliminary assessment of Washington's waters, visit our Web site at <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/303d/2006/index.html>.

For more information contact Ken Koch at 360-407-6782, or by e-mail at 303d@ecy.wa.gov.

If you need this publication in an alternate format, please call the Water Quality Program at 360-407-6404. Persons with hearing loss can call 711 for Washington Relay Service. Persons with a speech disability can call 877-833-6341.