What to Expect from a Livestock and Water Quality Site Visit

The livestock industry in Washington State is essential. It provides healthy, locally produced food and makes a significant contribution to our state's economy. While many livestock operators are doing their part to protect water quality, several areas of our state have water pollution problems associated with grazing lands.

When livestock drink directly from streams or spend too much time near streams, they can cause pollution to enter the water. Livestock-related pollution impairs many uses of the water including drinking water for people, habitat essential for fish and aquatic life, shellfish harvesting and recreation. The law protects these uses of the water, and makes it illegal to cause or contribute pollution to streams and other waters.

Protecting the plants and soil next to the stream and eliminating direct discharges from livestock are the best ways to prevent pollution from entering the water. By using off-stream water, fencing, and management, landowners can avoid streamside damage and polluted runoff.

What is the purpose of a site visit?

The Washington Department of Ecology's (Ecology) goal is to work with landowners to identify pollution problems and correct them when they are discovered. We understand that landowners may find our site visit uncomfortable. However, site visits are an opportunity for Ecology to discuss water quality issues and work with you to fix problems if they are found.

What will Ecology look for during a site visit?

Stream corridor - Protecting stream corridors is often the biggest key to keeping streams from being polluted. Ecology staff will look for signs that livestock are affecting the stream corridor. Signs might include:

- Bare ground and exposed soil.
- Contaminated run-off (active or potential).
- Slumping streambanks and erosion.
- Overgrazing of grasses.
- Absence of woody vegetation.
- Manure accumulations.
- Animal access to surface water.
- Livestock paths and trails along riparian areas.

Confinement areas – Confinement and winter feeding areas often cause considerable pollution because animals and their impacts are being concentrated into small areas. Ecology staff will be concerned about:

- Confinement areas close to surface water.
- Presence of mud and manure.
- Polluted runoff leaving the area.
- Stock tanks close to surface water.
- Overflow from tanks on to the ground.
- Signs of polluted run-off leaving the area.
- Signs of polluted run-off reaching water.
- Slope of the land adjacent to the area.
- Mud and standing water near tanks.
- Distribution of the stock water on the property.

Upland pasture areas – Upland pasture can also cause impacts to surface water if not managed properly. Ecology will be interested in:

- Animal access to stream corridors from pasture.
- Distance of setbacks from streams.
- Signs of overgrazing and erosion.
- Manure accumulations and bare ground

Manure management – Proper collection, disposal, storage, and use of manure is very important to ensure water quality is protected. Ecology staff will look for:

- A manure management plan.
- Evidence of frequent manure collection.
- Proper manure storage.
- Properly sized manure storage.
- Covered manure storage.
- Appropriate land application of manure.

What will Ecology discuss with you?

Current practices – So Ecology can understand how your operation may or may not be affecting water quality, Ecology staff is likely to ask questions about your management practices. The questions may be about pasture rotation, seasonal management, use of indoor/outdoor facilities, calving and weaning locations and timing, and other pertinent issues. The more helpful landowners are when explaining their operation, the more helpful we can be at getting landowners into compliance with water quality requirements.

Water quality observations – Ecology staff will discuss observations made during the site visit. Ecology staff will also discuss potential solutions and possible technical and financial assistance options.

Best management practices – There are specific practices needed to address the concerns listed above. Ecology staff and/or your local Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) or conservation district are likely to recommend site-specific BMPs for you. A list of general livestock BMPs includes:

- Installing livestock fencing to keep animals an adequate distance from surface water.
- Developing and locating off-stream water to eliminate the need to use the stream for livestock watering.
- Creating stream crossings and emergency water locations in ways that protect the stream (as needed).
- Managing pastures to prevent compaction, erosion, and contaminated runoff and improve forage health.
- Locating and designing confinement areas to prevent polluted runoff or impacts to groundwater.
- Collecting manure frequently and storing it in properly located, sized, and covered facilities or areas.
- Applying manure at agronomic rates, at proper times, and adequate distances from surface water.
- Providing heavy use protection in confinement areas and at stock tanks to prevent contaminated runoff.

Laws and regulations – There are many laws and regulations that apply to nonpoint sources of pollution, including from livestock operations. Washington State's Water Pollution Control Act (RCW 90.48) makes it illegal to cause or contribute pollution to streams. That law applies to grazing related pollution such as manure, urine, and erosion caused by livestock. Under state and federal law, Ecology is responsible for controlling and preventing water pollution and achieving clean water. Site visits can help you gain compliance with applicable laws and regulations. Ecology staff can answer any questions you may have about how the Water Pollution Control Act (RCW90.48) and the state Water Quality Standards (WAC173-201A) apply to livestock operations.

What happens after the site visit is completed?

Ecology is committed to working with you to implement any needed changes. If actions are necessary to protect water quality, we will provide timelines to complete necessary steps and the contact information of people who can help, including Ecology staff or staff at your local NRCS or local conservation district office. Ecology must make sure that management changes protect water quality to the level required by state law. Ecology may need to review plans and perform follow-up visits to verify that necessary practices are implemented and maintained.

Special accommodations:
If you need this document in a format for the visually impaired, call the Water Quality Program at 360-407-6600. Persons with hearing loss, call 711 for Washington Relay Service. Persons with a speech disability, call 877-833-6341.