

Enhancing our investments in water quality to protect salmon

Starting in state fiscal year 2015 (July 2014), Ecology will increase levels of riparian (stream-side) protection to both protect and restore salmon fisheries and achieve water quality standards. These new requirements will apply to funding for projects that address nonpoint pollution problems including Section 319 grants, Centennial Clean Water Fund grants or loans, and the Water Pollution Control State Revolving Fund loans.



In July 2011, Western Washington Treaty Tribes released the “Treaty Rights at Risk” paper. The paper stated treaty-reserved rights to harvest salmon and steelhead are being impaired by ongoing salmon habitat loss. To address concerns outlined in the paper, tribes approached federal government agencies that fund environmental work to improve salmon habitat and restore sustainable salmon fisheries to levels that meet treaty rights.

In response to tribal concerns, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) notified the Department of Ecology that it must take additional actions to protect salmon and salmon habitat. The EPA is requiring Washington State to include conditions on federal pass-through grants to be consistent with National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) buffer guidance to help protect and recover Washington’s salmon runs.

Ecology is following up by attaching the new, special conditions to grant funds to increase levels of riparian (stream-side) protection to both protect and restore salmon fisheries and help achieve water quality standards. Ecology is working with EPA and NMFS to develop clear funding guidance and ensure that future projects satisfy these conditions. Ecology will announce this guidance when it is complete.

Why it matters

Connecting salmon and water quality

In 1991, the federal government declared the Snake River sockeye as the first salmon species in the Pacific Northwest to be listed endangered under the Endangered Species Act. In subsequent years, U.S. Fish and Wildlife classified 16 more species of salmon as either threatened or endangered. Since that time, Washington citizens have been working to reverse the trend, and while gains have been made, important work remains.

Salmon need cool, clean water to survive. Healthy riparian vegetation helps keep streams cool, provides important habitat, and reduces nonpoint source pollution. Nonpoint source pollution is the leading cause of water quality impairments in Washington State and in the nation. Unlike pollution from point sources, which discharge through distinct and identifiable conveyances, nonpoint source pollution comes from many diffuse, hard to identify sources. In general, nonpoint pollution results from rainfall, snowmelt, and irrigation water that moves over and through the ground. As the runoff moves, it picks up and carries away pollutants and deposits them into lakes, rivers, wetlands, ground water, and other inland and coastal waters.

While nonpoint sources of pollution pose unique challenges, the solutions are often fairly straight forward, easily implemented, and relatively inexpensive.

Why stream-side habitat matters to salmon

Improving riparian or stream-side buffers can enhance both water quality and salmon recovery efforts. Riparian buffers of protective native vegetation along streams keep water clean and provide quality habitat for fish. Healthy riparian areas give salmon needed habitat and flows of cold, clean water for migrating, spawning, and rearing. Robust riparian buffers address nonpoint pollution, improve water quality, and increase salmon recovery.

For more information

For specifics about streamside areas eligible for funding, see Appendix L (page 99) of “Funding Guidelines State Fiscal Year 2015” at:

<https://fortress.wa.gov/ecy/publications/SummaryPages/1310041.html>

To receive up-to-date information, please sign up to receive email updates from the Water Quality Program Financial Assistance at: <http://listserv.wa.gov/cgi-bin/wa?SUBED1=ECY-WQ-GRANTS-LOANS&A=1>

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