

# Focus on: Water Quality Permitting to Control Nutrients in Puget Sound



## Learn more...

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## Provide feedback...

We are seeking public comments about using a general permit to control nutrients at WWTPs that discharge to Puget Sound marine waters and estuaries.

**Aug. 21, 2019 through  
Oct. 21, 2019 at 11:59 pm**

### Submit Comments:

<http://ws.ecology.commentinput.com/?id=HMk9A>

To view the public notice online, visit:

<https://ecology.wa.gov/Events/Search/Listing>.

## What problem are we trying to solve?

Excess nutrients can cause too much plant and algae growth which ultimately depletes dissolved oxygen (oxygen). Many parts of Puget Sound have oxygen levels that fall below the concentrations needed for marine life to thrive and are below our state's water quality criteria. Discharges of excess nutrients to Puget Sound from domestic sewage treatment plants (WWTPs) are significantly contributing to low oxygen levels in Puget Sound. Ecology must require WWTPs to control nutrients consistent with the US Clean Water Act and Washington's Water Pollution Control Act.

Most WWTPs are owned and operated by municipalities or public utility districts. Infrastructure costs associated with reducing nutrients from WWTPs are primarily paid by the public through local sewer rates. With our region's growing population and recognizing that WWTP improvements to limit nutrients will take time, we need to start work now.

## Why is Ecology considering a Puget Sound Nutrients General Permit?

We have made a preliminary determination that a general permit is the best tool to address excess nutrients from domestic WWTPs discharging to Puget Sound. A Puget Sound Nutrients General Permit would:

- Create a single coordinated public engagement process, allowing more stakeholder collaboration during permit development.
- Place WWTPs on a similar schedule rather than staggering requirements based on individual permit reissuance schedules.
- Provide a foundation for communities to work together to achieve nutrient controls across Puget Sound.

### Stay informed...

To receive email updates about this effort, register for the Nutrients Permit listserv, <http://listserv.ecology.wa.gov/scripts/waECOLGY.exe?SUBED1=NUTRIENTS-PERMIT&A=1>.

### Contact information

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### ADA accommodations

To request ADA accommodation including materials in a format for the visually impaired, visit <https://ecology.wa.gov/accessibility>, or call Ecology at 360-407-6831, Relay Service 711, or TTY at 877-833-6341.

### Availability in alternate languages

If you need this document in a language other than English, call Maia Hoffman at 425-649-7146.

## What is the purpose of this public comment period?

State regulation ([Chapter 173-226 WAC](#)) requires that we notify the public of a preliminary determination to develop a general permit. The primary purpose of this public comment period is to obtain feedback on whether a general permit is an appropriate tool to control and reduce nutrients in discharges from WWTPs to Puget Sound. The alternative to a general permit is to include nutrient control requirements in each WWTP's individual permit.

In addition, this is an opportunity for commenters to provide other information relevant to WWTPs and Puget Sound water quality. For example, you may provide any documented information on the characteristics of the discharge (individually or categorically) including effluent quantity, quality, and any receiving water impacts. Existing information about WWTPs and Puget Sound water quality is available in our [searchable database](#) and [relevant publications](#).

## How would a Nutrients General Permit work?

A Puget Sound Nutrients General Permit would apply to nearly 70 WWTPs discharging to marine and estuarine waters of Puget Sound. These WWTPs already have individual permits. A Nutrients General Permit would focus only on controlling nutrients. It would act in conjunction with the individual permits that regulate all other pollutants. Therefore, WWTPs would have two permits.

Because we are at the earliest stage of a general permit process, it is too soon to be certain about what the exact permit conditions would be. If we move forward with the general permit, the permit development process will determine:

- Which specific domestic WWTPs will be regulated by the proposed permit. A [potential WWTP permittee list](#) is available.
- How to cap nutrient loading. A cap could be expressed as a numeric effluent limit or other similar value against which effluent quality would be compared.
- What planning efforts are needed to evaluate nutrient reduction targets. Planning efforts might involve near-term WWTP optimization to reduce nutrients where possible with existing treatment infrastructure. Additional planning considerations may include infrastructure upgrade feasibility assessments, foundational work for water quality trading programs, or other collaborative water quality improvement efforts.
- How to specify numeric effluent limits that reflect treatment efficiency of existing WWTPs consistent with facility-specific engineering reports.

Controlling nutrients from WWTPs will not solve Puget Sound's low oxygen problem. WWTPs are only part of the solution, but a critical part. We will continue our work to reduce nutrients from other sources as well.