

Focus On: Recent Changes to Wastewater Operator



More information

Operator Certification

Rulemaking webpage

<https://go.usa.gov/xE8jP>

OpCert Webpage

ecology.wa.gov/opcert

Contact information

Jocelyn Jones

360-407-6321

jocelyn.jones@ecy.wa.gov

Special accommodations

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

People with impaired hearing may call Washington Relay Service at 711. People with speech disability may call TTY at 877-833-6341.

New Fees Beginning September 1, 2019

The purpose of the Wastewater Operator Certification program is to protect public health and the environment, including Washington's rivers, lakes, streams, and Puget Sound. By requiring certification of wastewater treatment plant operators, Ecology ensures that operators demonstrate competence to operate and maintain wastewater treatment plants or reclaimed water facilities.

Ecology must, by law, fund the Operator Certification Program with fees; however, the fees have been capped in the law since the 1980s. Rising costs over almost 40 years has meant that we've been unable to keep up with this obligation. The Legislature recognized this and removed the fee cap from the law, and directed Ecology to establish a new fee schedule in rule (Chapter 173-230 WAC).

To determine the new fee schedule, Ecology formed and worked with a Rule Advisory Committee (RAC)—made up of certified operators from each group level statewide—to advise us on the proposed changes. The RAC suggested we invert the historic fee structure, placing more of the burden to fund the program on renewal fees instead of application fees. This spread out the costs to the more numerous renewals and allowed us to reduce the cost for both the application fee and the renewal fee.

This also allowed us, based on RAC recommendations, to keep application fees for the Group I and Group I Operator in Training categories at \$50. At a time when the profession is losing its most experienced operators to retirement, we hope keeping entry-level application fees affordable will incentivize entry into the profession. See Table 1 for the proposed Fiscal Year 2020-2021 fee schedule.

The new fees will begin September 1, 2019.

Table 1: Fiscal Year 2020 and 2021 Fee Schedule

Category	Fiscal Year 2020	Fiscal Year 2021
Group I and Group I OIT (Operator in Training) Applications	\$50.00	\$50.00
Groups II through IV Applications and Groups II through IV OIT Applications	\$59.00	\$67.00
Renewals	\$64.00	\$98.00

New Operator in Training (OIT) Group II - IV

Ecology adopted another update to chapter 173-230 WAC to incentivize and encourage entry into and growth within the profession—new OIT group levels II - IV. These new group levels allow operators who do not meet the education and experience requirements for the full certification to apply for and take the exam.

Applicants who already hold a full certification may apply for an OIT certification one level above their full certification level. If they pass the exam for that level, they will hold an OIT certification for that level as well as their full certification.

Group II - IV OIT certifications can be held for two exam cycles, up to 10 years, while gaining the necessary experience to upgrade to the next group level for full certification. OIT II - IV operators are only required to meet the professional growth requirements for their full certification and will pay only one renewal fee.

All OITs ready to upgrade from an OIT to the next group level for full certification must apply for that group level. Once an application for an upgrade is approved, the operator will no longer hold the OIT certification and will be certified only at that higher level.

The addition of these OIT group levels should provide additional pathways for operators to advance their careers and should help treatment plants with their succession planning to address the coming shortage in certified operators as more and more experienced operators are retiring. This is a program we created as an incentive for operators and to assist employers. We will not require an operator to earn an OIT certification to advance to the next full certification level. Applicants not yet certified may apply only for an OIT I. There is no time limit as to how long an OTI I may remain at this group level.

