

Focus on: Framework for consistent greenhouse gas assessments



Reducing greenhouse gases can't wait

Climate change poses an urgent threat to Washington's water supplies, coastlines, forests, and economy. To address this threat, the 2020 Washington Legislature adopted new greenhouse gas emissions limits in RCW 70A.45.020:

- 2020 - Reduce total emissions to 1990 levels.
- 2030 - Reduce emissions 45% below 1990 levels.
- 2040 - Reduce emissions 70% below 1990 levels.
- 2050 - Reduce emissions 95% below 1990 levels and achieve net zero emissions.

Contact information

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Evaluating greenhouse gas emissions for large projects consistently and comprehensively

Washington continues to work on the best ways to reduce greenhouse gases and protect our state from climate change. A question that has come up over and over again is exactly how to evaluate greenhouse gas emissions and identify the impacts from proposed industrial and fossil fuel projects, such as those that depend on coal, oil, or natural gas.

To address this source of confusion and controversy, in 2019, Gov. Jay Inslee directed the Washington Department of Ecology to develop clear, consistent, and comprehensive rules for evaluating emissions from large projects.

"Future risks of climate change depend on decisions made today," Gov. Inslee wrote in his directive to Ecology. "As scientific understanding of the pace, scale, and drivers of climate change improves, governmental decision-making must adapt to new information."

Ecology began rulemaking to fulfill the Governor's directive and reached out to industry, local governments, environmental organizations, tribes, interested parties, and members of the public. Five webinars from June through November 2020 provided information for public feedback.

Ecology is now releasing additional information for what it calls the GAP rule, short for "Greenhouse Gas Assessment for Projects" (WAC 173-445). A framework document describes what would be covered in the draft rule, scheduled to be released in spring 2021.

In addition to asking for feedback on the rule framework and draft language on definitions and applicability, Ecology is also asking the public for input on questions related to mitigation. The agency is holding an informal comment period on the three documents from March 2 -30, 2021.

How to comment

The informal comment period for the rule framework and draft documents is from March 2- 30, 2021.

Comments can be submitted online at:

<http://ac.ecology.commenting.net.com/?id=biVaB>

Or by email at:

gap-rule@ecy.wa.gov.

More information

Information about the GAP rule is available at:

ecology.wa.gov/gap-rule

State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA)

50 years ago, the Washington Legislature enacted SEPA to protect our environment and people. The law requires the environmental impacts from a project be identified early in the process by agencies. It also requires identifying alternatives and mitigation measures.

The GAP rule will provide clear and comprehensive methods to evaluate greenhouse gas emissions and impacts from a project. This information will be used by agencies to evaluate projects as part of the SEPA process and for permit decisions. When the rule is completed, it will govern greenhouse gas evaluations for large projects under SEPA.

The GAP framework

Applicability

The GAP rule would apply to projects that require review under the State Environmental Policy Act, including new public or private facilities, or changes to an existing facility. The rule would be limited to projects which could emit about 10,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent or more per year from fossil fuels, biofuels, biomass, hydrocarbons, alcohols, industrial processes, and electricity use. The rule would not apply to programmatic reviews, housing developments, highway, road, or passenger rail projects, or projects which have already completed an environmental review. Ecology has created a simple screening process to determine whether the GAP rule applies to a project.

Greenhouse gas assessment

Applicable projects would be required to provide an estimate of their potential greenhouse gas emissions using the environmental assessment methods described in the rule. These methods require the use of best available science and current data.

The environmental assessment would include:

- Greenhouse gas analysis of on-site, upstream, and downstream emissions from the project.
- A life cycle analysis of the facility, its inputs or feedstocks, and its outputs or products.
- Analysis of how the project could change energy flows or uses.

Mitigation

The GAP rule would require developing a mitigation plan to reduce the impacts from greenhouse gas emissions resulting from a project. The framework describes the plan elements and we would like your input on this approach. Ecology is also asking for public input on specific questions about mitigation, such as:

- What greenhouse gas emissions should be covered by the mitigation plan?
- How should mitigation for emissions from projects which support decarbonization be considered? For example, should the amount of mitigation for such projects be decreased or eliminated based on the projects' contribution to a future decarbonized economy?

Next steps

Ecology is holding an informal comment period from March 2 -30 for stakeholders to review the GAP rule documents, with a goal of proposing a draft rule for formal public comment in spring 2021.

Special accommodations

To request ADA accommodation including materials in a format for the visually impaired, call Ecology at 360-407-6800 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.