

Focus on: Water Quality Permitting Budget Requests



WHY IT MATTERS

Ecology protects state waters by issuing state waste discharge and NPDES permits to manage when, where, and how treated wastewater and stormwater enters the environment.

Communities deserve to have water treatment infrastructure that meets their needs, and assurance from Ecology that these facilities are functioning properly to protect local waters.

Washington communities need a permitting program that responds to their needs and allows them to thrive while protecting the environment and improving water quality.

An adequately funded water quality permitting program will allow Ecology to provide these benefits to Washington.

Budget Requests

Ecology is requesting additional spending authority for \$10M from the water quality permit fee account to hire staff to address the municipal wastewater and industrial discharge permit backlogs. Ecology has fallen behind on updating permits every five years as required in federal law. Permit complexity has increased dramatically over the last decade while the number of permit staff has not. The current number of permit staff at Ecology is not sufficient to update permits, deliver timely reviews of engineering plans for facility updates, and provide technical assistance and regulatory oversight.

The problem

The permit backlog is at a critical point. Ecology's inability to reissue permits due to understaffing is negatively affecting facilities. Permittees have voiced concerns, including to the Legislature, that outdated permits put them at risk and delay their ability to make renovations or expansions necessary for community growth. Permittees are also concerned about limited technical support and poor responsiveness from Ecology due to understaffing.

Two-thirds of Ecology's municipal wastewater permits are currently expired because we do not have sufficient resources to update permits. Similarly, 44% of Ecology's industrial discharge permits are expired. If funded, our budget requests will provide the spending authority needed to hire the additional staff required to reduce the backlog over time.

The solution

To reduce the municipal wastewater permit backlog to 40% by 2025 and 20% by 2027, Ecology requires an additional 17.3 permit staff. The majority of these positions will be strategically located in the regions where the number of permits is greatest. Ecology's workload analysis demonstrates approximately one permit staff can effectively manage 10 wastewater treatment plant permits. With the additional staff in this request, all regional offices will be able to reach an optimal 10:1 permit to staff ratio.

To reduce the industrial discharge permit backlog to similar levels, Ecology requires an additional 18.4 permit staff to achieve the target ratio of 20 industrial discharge permits per permit staff. This will create capacity for timely permit development and compliance assurance activities. These positions will also be strategically located in the regions with the largest permit workload.

How Ecology's budget proposals will benefit Washington

Additional spending authority will allow Ecology to update domestic wastewater permits, provide timely reviews of engineering plans for facility updates, and improve operator certification support and technical assistance. As a result, municipalities will be able to better plan for growth, manage their facilities, experience faster technical assistance from Ecology, and improve water quality. Ecology will also be able to improve service delivery for other industrial permits, conduct compliance inspections and process new applications for general permit coverage.

If these requests are not funded, Ecology will continue to be understaffed and unable to meet permittees' needs. The permit backlog creates several types of risks. Environmentally, out-of-date permits do not reflect new standards for wastewater treatment, or the need to restrict pollutants further because of a water clean-up plan (TMDL). Permit requirements may no longer match the process a facility uses, which makes it harder to provide permit oversight.

Smaller facilities in particular value Ecology's expertise when they face technical challenges or emergencies like flooding. Without prompt technical assistance from Ecology, permittees don't have the information they need to inform daily operations and future planning for expansion and upgrades to better serve their community. In rare circumstances, permittees have even been sued for out-of-date permits.

More information

For more information on Ecology's water quality permit program, visit: <https://ecology.wa.gov/WQPermits>.

For more information on budget requests, visit: <https://ecology.wa.gov/About-us/Budget-legislative-priorities/Our-budget/2023-25-Budget>.

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ADA Accessibility

To request an ADA accommodation, contact Ecology by phone at 360-480-2141 or email at David.Giglio@ecy.wa.gov, or visit <https://ecology.wa.gov/accessibility>.

For Relay Service or TTY call 711 or 877-833-6341.