

Focus On: Water Treatment General Permit

The Water Treatment Plant General Permit covers approximately 30 of the public water filtration and treatment facilities around Washington State. Water treatment plants produce both drinking water for people and industrial water for manufacturing or other business operations to use. This permit regulates the water discharged from the facility as part of the process of making drinking water.

The [Washington State Department of Health Office of Drinking Water](https://doh.wa.gov/community-and-environment/drinking-water/office-drinking-water)¹ is responsible for ensuring the drinking water produced at these facilities is safe and reliable. Our role is to ensure that water discharged from these facilities after washing tanks or cleaning filters doesn't pollute lakes, rivers, or Puget Sound.

How do Water Treatment Plants work?

A water treatment plant or facility is not the same as a sewage or wastewater treatment plant. Water treatment facilities pull water from a variety of sources like rivers, reservoirs, groundwater, or lakes. This water needs treatment before it is for drinking or business operations.

Treatment often involves some combination of:

- Filtering or settling out sediment and disease-causing organisms
- Chemical treatment to remove excess minerals and other contaminants
- Final disinfection and chemical adjustment to protect the pipes that deliver water to customers

The wastewater from these facilities can be high in sediment and chlorine. A facility will typically treat

wastewater in a settling tank or pond to remove the sediment and allow the chlorine to dissipate.

How does the permit help facilities protect water quality?

The permit requires facilities to monitor the wastewater created from washing filters and water tanks, and stormwater associated with facility operations. They regularly sample their wastewater to make sure it doesn't harm the environment.

Facilities must manage the sources of pollution through planning and best management practices (BMPs) to control solid waste, stormwater, spills, and other pollution problems.

Ecology updates and reissues this permit every five years to ensure the permit stays relevant with the newest science and industry practices.

Who is required to have a permit?

All water treatment plants that discharge wash water, water used to clean treatment systems, to a waterbody and meet all of the following conditions need a permit:

- Primary function of the facility is to produce potable or "industrial" water.
- Produce equal to or greater than 35,000 gallons per day (monthly average).
- Discharge from water treatment filtration processes, such as rinsing filters or water tanks.
- Water treatment is not part of a larger, facility, such as a pulp and paper mill.

¹ <https://doh.wa.gov/community-and-environment/drinking-water/office-drinking-water>

Most water treatment plants in Washington State are not required to obtain this permit. This may be because a facility is too small, discharges to groundwater, or discharges to a sewer system. Ecology has studied and determined that the risk of polluting the environment from these types of discharges is low and therefore does not need a permit. Because of the simple treatment processes, treatment in a sedimentation pond is typically sufficient to remove harmful pollutants.

General permit vs. Individual permit

We use this general permit for about 30 of the water treatment facilities in Washington. A general permit allows a unified approach to regulating facilities or industries that make similar wastewater or stormwater. A general permit can simplify the permitting process, with the potential to save time and resources for the facility, industry, and Ecology while protecting the environment.

The Water Treatment Plant general permit does **not** cover wastewater produced from certain water treatment processes such as: ion exchange, reverse osmosis, or slow sand filtration. The wastewater created by these processes is different and may have different pollutants than the wastewater regulated with this permit. Facilities that use these processes may need an individual permit that has specific conditions about how the facility creates their wastewater to ensure the environment is protected.

How does the permit address PFAS pollution?

PFAS or Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances are a large group of manufactured “forever chemicals” because they never disappear from the environment. PFAS is found in a wide variety of products such as nonstick cookware, waterproof clothing, and firefighting foam.

Recently, Washington State Board of Health adopted State Action Levels for five of the PFAS chemicals. Due to this new drinking water standard, we anticipate that facilities that are found to have high levels of PFAS in their drinking water will upgrade their systems to use new treatment technologies. Because PFAS treatment is a rapidly evolving field, the permit requires facilities who install PFAS treatment to notify Ecology. We may require additional sampling or wastewater treatment at these facilities in the future.

What do I do if I see an issue?

If you see pollution or an environmental problem, you can report it anonymously via web form, email, or phone. We can receive reports in multiple languages. Let us know if you see:

- Discharges of dirty looking water near a facility
- Chlorine smell in streams or drainages near a facility

After you make a report, our [Environmental Report Tracking System \(ERTS\)](#)² staff can follow up.



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To request ADA Accommodation, contact Water Quality Reception at 360-407-6600. For Washington Relay Service or TTY call 711 or 877-833-6341. Visit

² <https://ecology.wa.gov/reportanissue>