Reducing nutrients in Puget Sound

January 2026 update

In 2025, Ecology took public comment on two parts of our work to address excess nutrients in Puget Sound: the Puget Sound Nutrient General Permit and the Puget Sound Nutrient Reduction Plan.

Based on the feedback we received in 2025, as well as legal rulings on permit appeals, we are not reissuing the Puget Sound Nutrient General Permit. Instead, we are addressing nitrogen discharges in the individual permits for the 58 wastewater treatment plants that were formerly covered under the general permit.

We have also determined that we have more work to do on our Puget Sound Nutrient Reduction Plan, which is Ecology's approach to guiding the region in addressing the many human sources of nutrient pollution.

Understanding excess nutrients in Puget Sound

As humans continue to add more nutrients, primarily nitrogen, it is causing water quality problems. Excess nutrients lead to a series of events that lower the oxygen levels in water. Low oxygen levels alter the marine food web in ways that impact endangered salmon and orca.

There are many human sources of excess nutrients coming into Puget Sound and we are working with communities in the region to address these sources. The largest source is the wastewater treatment plants that receive wastewater from area homes and businesses and then discharge into the Sound. Ecology is in the process of requiring nutrient controls at these facilities, which over time will lead to a major reduction in the amount of nitrogen going into Puget Sound.

Puget Sound Nutrient General Permit

The general permit became effective in January 2022. The permit was mandatory for 58 municipal wastewater treatment plants that discharge directly into Puget Sound. This general permit was unique, as the goal of the permit was to address the nitrogen discharges from the facilities, separate from their existing individual water quality permits.

While the general permit was in effect, permittees were required to do the following:

- Monitor wastewater for nitrogen
- Optimize current treatment processes to remove as much nitrogen as possible.
- Plan for future facility upgrades to control nutrients.

In 2022, Ecology awarded $9 million from the state legislature as part of a new grant program for these facilities to support treatment plant optimization and planning for future facility upgrades.

Permit appeal

The 2022 general permit was appealed by several municipalities, two environmental groups, and the Suquamish Tribe. The appeals covered a range of issues, but the majority of the permit remained in effect during the appeal process.

In February 2025, the Pollution Control Hearings Board invalidated the general permit, concluding that Ecology doesn't have the authority to require mandatory coverage under the general permit in addition to each facility's individual water quality permit.

In response, Ecology released a draft revised general permit for public comment that proposed to allow the 58 facilities to choose to opt-in to the general permit or rely on their individual permits only.

Ecology's next steps on permitting

While Ecology originally favored the general permit approach for controlling nitrogen from Puget Sound wastewater treatment plants, once we could no longer make it mandatory, we reevaluated the best approach for moving forward with nutrient controls.

After reviewing public comments, we have determined that incorporating nitrogen control requirements into individual permits for facilities makes more sense at this time.

We will begin proposing updates to individual permits in 2026. In addition to nutrient controls, draft permits will include any other necessary updates to each facility's permit. For wastewater treatment plants with recently updated permits, we plan to propose permit modifications to add in nutrient control requirements.

Proposed changes to permits will be made available for public review and comment, and Ecology's final permit decisions are appealable.

The nitrogen monitoring that permittees conducted under the general permit will help inform the nutrient control requirements we propose for each facility. The efforts made by facilities to optimize their current operations will continue to be beneficial.

We encourage local governments and utility districts to continue their long-term planning to invest in nutrient controls and any other necessary updates to their wastewater treatment facilities to meet future projected needs and population growth.

Funding available

We provide millions of dollars in funding every year to improve, protect, and restore water quality across the state. This includes investments in wastewater, stormwater, and nonpoint pollution reduction strategies.

We have a single application process to access most of our water quality funding called the Water Quality Combined Funding Program. We take applications every fall and announce our draft funding offer list every January, with final funding award offers made after we receive our budget from the legislature.

This includes the Puget Sound Nutrient Reduction Grant Program. Ecology received $10 million from the 2025 legislative session to continue the grant program. The funding can be used for many activities related to nutrient control and reductions, including planning, monitoring, and determining operational efficiencies. Because the goal of the grant program is to address the largest source of excess nutrients going into Puget Sound, only the 43 entities that operate the 58 municipal wastewater treatment plants that discharge to Puget Sound are eligible. Ecology will announce the draft awardees for this round of funding by the end of January 2026.

Recognizing the unique challenges faced by small communities in our state, we provide technical assistance to small communities, focused on their water quality infrastructure needs. We have a simplified funding process to help small communities access funding to move from planning, to design, to construction.

Related Information

- Puget Sound Nutrient General Permit: ecology.wa.gov/NutrientPermit
- Our overall Puget Sound Nutrient Strategy: ecology.wa.gov/ReducingNutrients
- Our grant and loan funding: ecology.wa.gov/WQGrants

Jon Kenning
Jon.Kenning@ecy.wa.gov
360-407-6505

To request an ADA accommodation, email thea.angeli@ecy.wa.gov, call 564-669-1889, or dial 711 to call through the Washington Telecommunications Relay for services like text telephone (TTY). Visit ecology.wa.gov/ADA for more accessibility information.