Stormwater Action Monitoring

Regional Spill Hotline Feasibility Study

Source Identification

Lead Entity

King County Department of Natural Resources and Parks

Partners

Herrera Environmental Consultants, Inc.

Hardwick Research

Other participants:

Washington State Department of Ecology

Stormwater Work Group (SWG)

Source ID Subgroup

Technical Advisory Committee

Survey participants

Interview participants

Cooperating vendors

Collectively improving stormwater management

Stormwater Action Monitoring (SAM) is a collaborative, regional stormwater monitoring program that is funded by more than 90 Western Washington cities and counties, the ports of Seattle and Tacoma, and the Washington State Department of Transportation. SAM's goal is to improve stormwater management to reduce pollution, improve water quality, and reduce flooding. We do this by measuring stormwater impacts on the environment and evaluating the effectiveness of stormwater management actions.

Questions about SAM?
See ecology.wa.gov/SAM

Study goals

The goal of this study was to assess the feasibility of a regional or statewide "hotline" (reporting system) for citizens and municipal staff in Washington state to report spills and environmental incidents.

Key study questions included:

1. Is a regional spill reporting system technically feasible?
2. Is a regional spill reporting system preferred?

Stormwater management problem

The municipal stormwater permit requires jurisdictions to publicize a hotline or other telephone number for public reporting of spills and other illicit discharges. Permittees have expressed doubt about public awareness, confusion around numbers that vary widely by location, and concerns about potential delays and inefficiencies in spill response leading to lost opportunities to prevent environmental damages. Stormwater managers want to know what options are available to improve spill reporting and interjurisdictional cooperation, whether the options are recommended for regional-scale implementation, and what considerations individual jurisdictions should take into account.

Project findings

This project documented industry knowledge, experience, and preferences and interviewed municipalities, Ecology, hotline owners, and vendors. The final report contains a brief overview of findings as well as two appendices containing interview summaries and an options matrix.

1. Based on the survey and interviews, the idea of implementing a regional spill reporting system is not broadly supported by most jurisdictions or state agencies.
2. Currently, municipalities interpret and use Ecology's Environmental Report Tracking System (ERTS) for regional spill reporting. Although Ecology did not initially intend for ERTS to function as a regional spill reporting system, it is used for that purpose to some extent.
3. Implementation of a multi-jurisdiction regional spill reporting system is technically feasible. Multiple vendors can provide accessible, cloud-based products with desired features including geodynamic routing, data standardization, and two-way communication with the public.
4. Implementation of a regional spill reporting system could streamline Municipal NPDES Permit annual reporting activities and promote regional analysis while allowing local spill response procedures to remain in place.

Recommendations

This study determined that implementing a regional spill reporting system is feasible and identified key benefits of a regional system that are not addressed by the current system of disparate local hotlines. The study identified overall low support from jurisdictions to implement a new regional system. However, these recommendations can apply at smaller scales for individual jurisdictions or several jurisdictions working together. The study recommends further discussions on this topic. See next page for specific recommendations.

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Recommendations for implementing a regional spill reporting system:

- Incorporate the following core components for a centralized system:
  - Primary coordinating entity
  - Central call center (supplemental service)
  - Central web form
  - Central cloud-based data storage
  - Mobile application is not necessary
- To promote equity and accessibility:
  - Provide a central hotline number
  - Offer multiple language options for phone and web formats
  - Allow anonymous reporting when necessary
- For multi-jurisdiction regional spill reporting systems, establish a primary coordinating entity to:
  - House centralized data
  - Manage contracting and system maintenance
  - Lead a cohesive communication network
- Use vendors that prioritize features which support efficient response, streamlined reporting, regional analysis, and community engagement:
  - Map integration
  - Geodynamic routing
  - Workflow customization
  - Data standardization
  - Follow-up (two-way communication) with community members
- While possible, a hybrid system (integrating the local hotline with a regional hotline) is not the primary recommendation of this study due to added costs and workflow complexity.
- Further cost evaluation for regional implementation would require a preliminary structure (e.g., system components, participants, and hybrid features).

Recommendations for Ecology:

- Post clarifying language on the purpose, function, and limitations of ERTS on Ecology's website.
- Configure a regional spill reporting system, if implemented, for compatibility with ERTS and WQWebIDDE. Participate directly in the system to receive reports in a preferred format.

Recommendations for future study:

- Resurvey jurisdictions to determine whether opinions have changed based on vendor capabilities.
- Form a preliminary structure with centralized entity to begin interjurisdictional coordination and define cost variables.
- If broad regional implementation is still not desired, consider local or subregional strategies and options identified in this study (Appendix 1 and 2 of final report).
- Gather community input on what would make spill reporting easier. Consider jurisdictions' needs for more public outreach support.

Why does this study matter?

There are over 90 municipal stormwater permittee hotlines for the public to report spills to the environment and stormwater system in Western Washington alone. Complex coordination among state and local programs can delay spill reporting and response. This study was funded to examine feasibility of a single regional hotline to complement local numbers. Interestingly, despite enough support to fund this feasibility study, surveys and interviews of stormwater permittees indicate a reluctance to support a modern regional hotline; many believe the role is filled by Ecology's ERTS.

What will Ecology do with this information?

The ERTS reporting system continues to rely on an imperfect process, and some delays in reporting are likely when ERTS reports are submitted outside of work hours. Though the Water Quality Program at Ecology has a limited role in the maintenance and enhancement of ERTS, we aim to improve reporting timeframes for jurisdictions. We will aim to streamline reporting requirements for the municipal stormwater permit where feasible and appropriate.

What should we do with this information?

Stormwater managers may consider subregional approaches working in cooperation with other jurisdictions. The concept is technically feasible, and potential advantages include improved response times to reported spills, mobilization efficiencies, data standardization, and better interjurisdictional communication.

For more information

Visit the SAM website at www.ecology.wa.gov/SAM and search for "regional spill hotline feasibility."

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