



Briefsheet

Overview of the Water Quality Program

Issue

The mission of the Washington State Department of Ecology's Water Quality Program is "To protect, preserve, and enhance Washington's surface and ground water quality, and to promote the wise management of our water for the benefit of current and future generations."

Background

The objectives of the Water Quality Program are as follows:

- To protect, preserve, and enhance the quality of the state surface and ground water, ensuring the wise environmentally sound use of the state's water resources;
- Prevent generation of pollutants; and
- Achieve a water quality stewardship ethic and an educated public.

Ecology is responsible for issuing wastewater discharge permits under the State Water Pollution Control Act (Chapter 90.48). Under the act, Ecology operates a state waste discharge permit program for discharges to surface and ground water, sewerage systems, and storm drains. Ecology also has authority to carry out provisions of the federal Clean Water Act. Ecology issues both State Water Pollution Control Act and National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permits.

Ecology's Water Quality Program has made dramatic progress toward ensuring wastewater and stormwater discharges are managed. In 1991, 55 percent of Ecology's 1,090 wastewater discharge permits needed updating or re-issuing. At the end of fiscal year 1996, nine percent of the 4,022 wastewater discharge permits needed updating.

The program focuses on point and nonpoint sources of pollution. Ecology nonpoint water pollution prevention work is largely voluntary focusing on agriculture, urban runoff, and

general water quality complaints. Ecology does have enforcement capability under the state Water Pollution Control Act when needed for correcting particularly difficult nonpoint water pollution problems. Rules to protect water quality from forest practices are jointly adopted by Ecology and the Forest Practices Board.

Forest practices activities are chiefly driven by the Timber Fish and Wildlife Agreement known as TFW. The Timber Fish and Wildlife Agreement, signed in 1986, is a cooperative program involving Indian tribes, environmental groups, industries, and county and state government agencies. The Timber, Fish and Wildlife Agreement is aimed at cooperatively managing forest land, setting policies, and doing research. Agricultural nonpoint source pollution is largely managed under the Agricultural Memorandum of Agreement, signed in 1988. The Memorandum of Agreement is a cooperative effort among Ecology, the Conservation Commission, and nearly all of the conservation districts in the state. The agreement sets up a response process to handle agricultural water quality complaints and enforcement actions.

In addition, through nonpoint water pollution prevention, Ecology works with local governments to support watershed planning and implementation. Watershed management is a holistic approach for handling water pollution and prevention. Watershed management involves the public in a review of water quality issues and needs across an entire watershed or drainage area and it involves people in designing solutions locally.

Ecology also works with the Washington State Department of Health to protect shellfish harvesting areas of the state. This is accomplished through watershed planning and technical assistance to local governments.

The program is responsible for developing surface and ground water quality standards.

The program is also responsible for working with local communities and public agencies to improve the water quality of Washington by providing financial and technical assistance. In cooperation with federal, state, and local governments, the program provides financial and technical assistance to public entities for water quality management facilities and activities.

The Water Quality Program administers several federal and state financial and technical assistance programs.

The Centennial Clean Water Fund. A 1986 state statute created the Water Quality Account to replace Referendum 39. The fund is financed primarily through taxes on tobacco products. It goes toward assisting local governments with grants and low interest loans for planning and implementing municipal water quality improvement projects; controlling point source and nonpoint water pollution; preventing ground water pollution; and conducting information and education projects. As of October 1996, Ecology has awarded \$394 million of the Centennial Clean Water Fund for water pollution control projects.

State Revolving Fund. In 1987, Congress established the State Revolving Fund to replace the construction grant program. This program awards low-interest loans to public entities primarily for upgrading or building water pollution control systems. The federal government provides 80 percent of the funds to the state in the form of a grant that must be matched with 20 percent state funds from the water quality account. As of October 1996, Ecology has offered approximately \$278.1 million in low-interest loans under the State Revolving Fund.

Fresh Water Aquatic Weeds Management Program. In 1991, the legislature authorized and funded the Fresh Water Aquatic Weeds Management Program to combat noxious aquatic plants in state waters. The aquatic weeds program offers grants to public organizations to support planning and implementation to control aquatic weeds, conduct public information and education activities, and provide technical assistance. Each biennium, since Ecology began the Aquatic Weeds Management Fund, it has issued approximately \$800,000 in grants.

Ecology administers the Federal Clean Water Act's 319 Grant program which is a \$1.8 million grant for federal fiscal year 1996. The 319 grant money is for watershed-based implementation activities aimed at addressing nonpoint water pollution. Not-for-profit entities may apply for the grant money.

Current Situation

The Water Quality Program focus is on a geographic basin management approach that includes regulation, prevention, and enforcement. The program continues to focus efforts on increasing technical assistance, public involvement, and education to help the public, governments, businesses, and industries to understand and comply with environmental laws and regulations.

The watershed approach to water quality management geographically targets water quality assessments, watershed permitting, and nonpoint source programs. The approach establishes 23 water quality management areas (basins) within the state, synchronizes water quality assessments and wastewater permitting, and schedules permitting and enforcement activities within management areas according to a five year rotating cycle. In July 1993 the Water Quality Program initiated the approach.

Since beginning the watershed approach, the program has also maintained its baseline program of permitting, monitoring, inspections, and enforcement actions statewide. The program is focused on addressing the most significant and critical environmental problems, responding to permit applications from new wastewater treatment plant facilities, and responding to other mandated obligations.

For further information, contact the following people at Ecology:

Dick Wallace Headquarters	(360) 407-6405 (voice)
Kelly Susewind Southwest Region	(360) 407-6271 (voice)
Tom Tebb Central Region	(509) 457-7107 (voice)
Kevin Fitzpatrick Northwest Region	(206) 649-7033 (voice)
James Bellatty Eastern Region	(509) 329-3400 (voice)

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