



# Briefsheet

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## Small Community Assistance

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### Issue

Small communities across Washington are facing the same problem: increased costs of providing basic services and protecting public health. In the past 20 years, small town populations and per capita income have generally declined or grown very slowly. Meanwhile, wastewater systems have deteriorated. At the same time, state and federal funds to help meet these needs have declined and competition for these monies has intensified.

In response, the Department of Ecology has several strategies underway. The strategies are to help low income and rural communities improve their quality of life through infrastructure improvements to their wastewater systems--in programs that are designed to be cheaper, better, and faster.

### Background

Nearly half of Washington's citizens live in small towns, unincorporated suburbs, and rural communities -- that's 48 percent of the state's population.

In many of the small towns, water quality is not being protected adequately. In some communities, wastewater treatment plants have fallen apart due to neglect and lack of community funds for maintenance and replacement of equipment. The economy in many of these communities has declined in recent years with reductions in timber production/forestry and salmon fishery jobs. Many small towns are struggling to pay for infrastructure such as treatment plants to ensure their water quality is preserved, thus protecting their citizens' and environment's health.

### Current Situation

Ecology is involved with multiple programs to help small communities protect and improve water quality. Ecology's help comes in the form of technical and financial assistance. Working with other organizations, Ecology is helping communities to build needed infrastructure cheaper, better, and faster.

**The Small Towns Environment Project (STEP).** STEP is designed to help communities help themselves through volunteering community talents to construct wastewater systems. STEP is designed to help small, rural communities take charge of the problem and action by themselves. The basic philosophy of STEP is "in order to get money, need less of it." Through STEP, Ecology is helping communities find ways to reduce overall project costs, use volunteer hours as a match to state and federal grants, and provide partnerships with other communities. Taking actions by themselves, allows communities to save 20 - 50 percent of the conventional wastewater systems' project costs. As of December 1996, Ecology is working with nine communities.

### **Environmental Partnerships With Washington Communities.**

Environmental Partnerships With Washington Communities is designed to assist small communities come into compliance with environmental regulations by setting priorities over time. Many

communities face multiple regulatory mandates that cannot be addressed simultaneously. By participating in Environmental Partnerships, a community can determine what its most important regulatory issues are and address the issues one at a time. This gives communities a compass, a path to results in successful compliance over time.

## **Future Considerations**

It is important to understand small, rural communities. During 1997, Ecology will work with some small communities to determine environmental problems and activities. Based upon the assessment of the problem, Ecology will then begin to help those communities set priorities to address problems.

In addition, workshops on environmental compliance are planned for small communities for 1997. The focus of the workshops will be on wastewater and drinking water.

Several state agencies and private, non-profit organizations are already involved in small community assistance.

In order to be most effective it is important to coordinate with these assistance providers and take advantage of their leadership and good works that have already been accomplished.

In order to achieve lasting results with communities and improve agency relationships with local governments, Ecology must be coordinated and consistent with local communities. Small communities most often have only one person that is responsible for multiple environmental regulatory requirements. Ecology must work together to effectively help small communities.

The Rural Development Council led an effort to streamline government planning requirements. The effort was to minimize the planning required by deferring as much as possible to existing comprehensive plans created by the communities. Ecology will consider ways to streamline its planning requirements to take advantage of the information found in existing local plans.

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