



Focus

Lower Skokomish River water quality study

Background

The state Department of Ecology (Ecology) is studying sources of fecal coliform bacteria in the lower Skokomish River in Mason County. The lower river includes Purdy Creek, Weaver Creek, Ten-Acre Creek, Vance Creek and Hunter Creek. The study area also includes the south and north forks of the Skokomish River.

Ecology is studying these stream segments because past data suggest they do not meet state water-quality standards due to contamination from fecal coliform bacteria. In addition, nearby Annas Bay is threatened with future shellfish-harvest restrictions, in part thought to be due to fecal coliform contamination from the Skokomish River.

The Skokomish tribe, which owns land in the valley, much of it wetlands, conducted a water quality study of the Skokomish River in 1995-97 using an Ecology grant. The tribe found levels of fecal coliform bacteria in the lower river exceeded the limits allowed under state water-quality standards.

Also, Ecology's needs assessment conducted for the eastern Olympic Basin water-quality management area (parts of Lewis, Thurston, Jefferson and Clallam counties and most of Mason County) determined there was sufficient data to warrant further investigation. As a result, these stream segments were listed as high priorities for water cleanup plans, and the fecal coliform study was initiated.

There are many possible causes of fecal coliform bacteria in the Skokomish. Many of the residences in this area are small- to mid-acreage farms, spread apart in a very rural setting. A number raise beef cattle, sheep and hobby animals. Residences rely on on-site septic systems. The area is also home to significant wildlife populations.

The upper watershed of the Skokomish River basin has been heavily logged, resulting in increased runoff into the lower watershed. In addition, the lower river bottom has risen dramatically over time, due to sediment from road-building for upstream logging activity. As a result, the area is prone to flooding, which has been an escalating problem in recent years.

Ecology began studying the lower river and tributaries in December 1998. Sampling began in January 1999 and will last for about one year.

After the data is collected, it may take a year or more for Ecology to analyze it and develop a final report. Then, Ecology will work with all parties to reach agreement on how to improve water quality.

Concurrently, the Mason Conservation District has been funded through a Centennial Clean Water Fund grant to conduct farm planning and stream restoration in the Skokomish Valley.

Benefits of the study to people will include: cleaner drinking water that benefits public health; improved water quality that benefits fish, shellfish and the local economy; and protection of the natural, pristine character of the lower Skokomish Valley.

When study results are completed, Ecology will begin developing a water cleanup plan for fecal coliform bacteria in the lower Skokomish Valley, in partnership with local governments and residents. Public meetings will be held to review the findings and to encourage an open dialogue, allowing the local community to have a say in how to solve the pollution problems. Farm plans through the local conservation district may be a major component of the water cleanup plan.

For more information

For more information, contact Jeannette Barreca at (360) 407-6556.