

Ecology Updates for the Agriculture and Water Quality Advisory Committee



October 2023 Updates

Nonpoint Plan update and Voluntary Clean Water Guidance for Agriculture

Washington's [Water Quality Management Plan to Control Nonpoint Sources of Pollution](#) (Nonpoint Plan) outlines Washington State's approach for addressing water quality impacts from nonpoint sources of pollution. This plan describes how we meet Clean Water Act requirements and ensures eligibility for 319 grant funding for nonpoint pollution control projects across the state. Our next Plan update is due to EPA by December 1, 2025. We've started to develop the 2025 Plan, including incorporating lessons learned from past plans. We are planning an extensive engagement period to listen to partners and communities engaged in this work and impacted by water quality policies. To receive updates or learn more, contact Hannah Coe (hannah.coe@ecy.wa.gov).

We are continuing work on the [Voluntary Clean Water Guidance for Agriculture](#). To date, we've released five chapters focusing on tillage and residue management, riparian areas, pasture and rangeland grazing, animal confinement and manure handling, and sediment control. Future chapters will cover nutrient and pesticide management, cropping methods, sediment control, water management, and suites of recommended practices. We request feedback on each chapter as they are developed. The remaining chapters will be completed by December 2025.

The guidance presents a suite of options for producers to help ensure compliance with state water quality laws, and completed chapters are incorporated into the [SFY2025 Water Quality Combined Funding Program Guidelines](#). We will continue to update our guidance and incorporate completed chapters to support the implementation of agricultural BMPs to protect water quality.

Work in the Watersheds

Eastern Washington

Focus areas

The Eastern Region Office completed work within the following focus areas:

- Blue Mountain tributaries to Snake River (Asotin, Tenmile, Alpowa, Deadman, and Meadow Creek)
- Direct Whitman County Tributaries to the Snake River (Steptoe, Wawawai, Penawawa, Alkali Flat)
- Walla Walla River
- Palouse River and tributaries including Spring Flat Creek
- Hangman Creek
- Little Spokane River Watershed
- Hawk Creek

Watershed evaluation and implementation work

As part of the watershed evaluation work, we prioritize parcels needing follow-up based on specific water quality criteria and then contact landowners. We contacted 33 new sites in the seven areas in late spring and summer this year. Here is the breakdown:

Table 1. New priority sites contacted

Watershed	New Site #	Land-use
Hangman	15	Livestock and Tillage
Little Spokane River	5	Livestock and Tillage
Spring Flat Creek	5	Livestock and Tillage
Other priority watersheds	8	Livestock

We also call producers to explain the watershed evaluation process, discuss the availability of technical and financial assistance, and offer a site visit to help them make the needed management changes. Staff in the Eastern Region have performed 10 farm site visits with these producers so far and have additional site visits scheduled.

Eastern region staff continue to develop implementation strategies within three new watersheds. The watersheds have varying levels of dryland agriculture and livestock production. These watersheds include Spring Flat Creek (South Fork Palouse River tributary), Alkali Flat Creek (Snake River tributary), and the Upper Colville River watershed. Regional staff are currently working with partners to ensure resources are in place to assist landowners in the watersheds that want help.

Work to improve oxygen levels and reduce sediment, bacteria, and temperature inputs to Hangman Creek continues. Staff recently finalized the annual report for the implementation required as part of the Hangman Creek Settlement Agreement with the Spokane Riverkeeper. The report highlights significant progress made in 2023, including our partnership with the Spokane Conservation District on the Hangman Creek Riparian Restoration Pilot project. Ecology initially invested \$1 million into this program that compensates landowners for 15 years of lost revenue for riparian land taken out of dryland agriculture production and streambanks planted with native trees and shrubs. The original goal of the project was to protect and restore 70 acres of riparian area. Due to strong demand among landowners, Ecology added an additional \$2.4 million for another 100 acres. Implementation of the 170 acres began this spring and will be ramping up throughout this fall. Ecology is now working with the Spokane Conservation District on a \$500K proposal to continue enrolling sites who have been contacted by Ecology and are interested in the program. Ecology recently released a [blog](#) about the restoration project.

Looking ahead

We are looking for opportunities to expand this approach outside of the Hangman watershed. We are in discussions with the Palouse and Whitman Conservation Districts to replicate the pilot program in Spring Flat Creek. A recent land use study of the Spring Flat Creek watershed indicated only 1% of the riparian areas in the watershed are intact. Ecology began contacting sites in Spring Flat Creek and have met with two farms to discuss conservation tillage and riparian protection. We strive to ensure a variety of funding options will be available to these producers.

Eight additional Ecology Centennial/319 grants were awarded this year to fund water quality protection practices in the Eastern Region. The new grants will provide more than \$3.4 million in additional support.

Central Washington

Focus areas

The Central Region Office completed work within the following focus areas:

- Wide Hollow Creek
- Upper Naches and Cowiche Creek
- Bonaparte Creek
- White Salmon River
- Wilson Creek
- Granger Drain

Watershed evaluation and implementation work

The Wide Hollow Creek Temperature TMDL continues to make progress. The current focus is on providing allocations and goals for heat load reductions for discharges that include the municipal storm water, the fruit packing industry, and irrigation related direct discharges to the creek.

The study plan for the Bacteria Water Cleanup Project in the White Salmon River is being implemented. Ecology is collecting data to identify potential sources and associated land uses. This information will support water cleanup efforts and help prioritize projects to address bacteria contamination in the watershed. We are also conducting outreach in the watershed.

A nonpoint assessment project in the Bonaparte Creek Watershed in Okanogan County is ongoing. We're coordinating the conservation district to address bacteria and temperature water quality impairments.

Ecology staff are implementing the Wilson Creek (Kittitas County) and Grainger Drain (Yakima County) TMDLs, including landowner outreach and surface water monitoring. Both projects seek to lower sediment transport and the associated contaminants being transported from agricultural lands into tributaries feeding the Yakima River. Additional efforts and monitoring in these waterways are being coordinated with local watershed partners. Monitoring shows progress towards meeting the TMDL loading goals for these two watersheds.

CRO WQ staff continue to follow up on Environmental Report Tracking System complaints. These complaints include livestock (including range land cattle) access to rivers, streams, or lakes. We work with the landowners on livestock related complaints, guiding them to resources to assist in protecting water quality. This year we've received complaints for incidents in Okanogan, Kittitas, Yakima, and Douglas counties.

Looking ahead

The implementation plan for Upper Naches and Cowiche Creek Temperature TMDL Plan is under development and we are talking with partners in the watershed about implementation activities for nonpoint sources and increased stream shading.

CRO has experienced shifts in staffing, and we are looking forward to bringing on new staff in the future to further our watershed assessment and nonpoint work.

Ten additional Ecology Centennial/319 grants were awarded this year to fund water quality protection practices in the Central Region. The new grants will provide more than \$3.1 million in additional support.

Western Washington – Southwest

Focus areas

The Southwest Region Office completed work within the following focus areas:

- Enumclaw Plateau (Boise, Pussyfoot, & Second Creeks)
- East Fork Lewis River
- Greater Key Peninsula
- Eld Inlet, Henderson Inlet, & Nisqually Reach
- Oakland Bay & Johns Creek
- Skokomish Valley & Annas Bay
- Nisqually River & Ohop Creek
- Lacamas Creek

Watershed evaluation and implementation work

Southwest Region Office has been undergoing a time of rebuilding; for much of this year, SWRO has had four vacancies in our nonpoint unit.

With only two nonpoint staff in the Southwest Region for much of the year, we have been primarily focused on ERTS response, while also working to maintain relationships with partners and ensure that active sites keep moving forward, in accordance with the compliance pathway, to implement changes to improve water quality. Staff have sent seven technical assistance letters to sites identified as a result of environmental reports from the public, three follow-up letters, and one Warning Letter.

While balancing shifting priorities with reduced staffing has been challenging, SWRO nonpoint staff have risen to the occasion. After abnormally high amounts of fecal coliform were found during routine sampling around Vaughn Bay on the Key Peninsula, 46 letters were sent to residents. These letters outline potential pollution sources from septic systems, livestock management practices, and pet waste. They also outline steps landowners can take to address these pollution sources, as well as information about financial resources that may be available to landowners. We offer joint site visits from Ecology and the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department. By developing and maintaining relationships with a variety of partners on the ground, we can leverage the resources of our partners to provide more extensive technical and financial assistance to support landowners and agricultural producers implement practices to improve water quality.

Looking ahead

We recently hired three new staff and are excitedly diving into the onboarding and training process. With the onboarding of new staff members, and two vacancies yet to be filled, we are looking forward to once again operating at full capacity and re-engaging with proactive work in all our local watersheds.

Eight additional Ecology Centennial/319 grants were awarded this year to fund water quality protection practices in the Southwest Region. The new grants will provide more than \$3.1 million in additional support.

Western Washington – Northwest and Bellingham Field Offices

Focus areas

The Northwest Region and Bellingham Field Offices completed work within the following focus areas:

- Green River

- Snohomish River
- Lower Skagit River & South Skagit Bay
- Padilla Bay Tributaries
- Samish River
- Kitsap Peninsula
- Lake Whatcom & Whatcom Creek
- Nooksack River & South Fork Nooksack River
- Drayton Harbor

Watershed evaluation and implementation work

We are implementing two TMDLs in the Green River watershed: the Green River Temperature TMDL and the Newaukum Creek Temperature TMDL (both approved by EPA in 2011). Both studies found that lack of adequate riparian vegetation contributes to temperature impairments. Implementation is focused on riparian restoration by removing invasive species and planting native vegetation. Ecology is funding two new riparian restoration projects in the Newaukum watershed that together will restore at least 43 acres of riparian buffers, as well as install 3,000 feet of livestock fencing, a watering facility, and a heavy use protection area.

In the past year we have contacted 13 property owners in the Snohomish River Basin to offer technical assistance and conducted site visits at two of the properties. To date, two of these properties have taken actions to address water quality concerns such as removing animals from streamside access and planning to work with the CD to plant riparian buffers. We are currently managing 11 nonpoint grants in the Snohomish Basin, supporting our partners on the ground to improve water quality.

Ecology redistributed the “Skagit Valley’s Warming Waters” video series via a social media campaign in June 2023 as a part of Orca Action Month. The videos aim to raise awareness of the water temperature concern and guide viewers to locally available resources to take action. A kids Spanish/English bi-lingual activity worksheet is in development to support distribution of the videos in summer 2024 and is being designed to meet the needs of the Skagit community outreach professionals.

Ecology staff continue to work with Skagit County water quality staff on nonpoint response cases and provide support as needed. From late 2022 to now, staff mailed technical assistance letters to eight landowners in the lower Skagit tributaries and performed four site visits with landowners. As a result, approximately 775 feet of dysfunctional fencing was replaced on one property to keep cattle out of surface waters, and seven livestock owners agreed to improve their manure and pasture management practices.

On the Kitsap Peninsula, we mailed technical assistance letters to three Kitsap County landowners from late 2022 to now and performed three site visits with landowners. As a result, one livestock owner improved their manure management practices along Gamble Creek, and another just upstream is actively pursuing funding with the Kitsap Conservation District to relocate and improve the manure storage bin for their horse boarding facility.

Ecology staff worked with the Kitsap Public Health District and the Kitsap Conservation District to address bacteria pollution concerns at a horse boarding facility in the Anderson Creek watershed. A warning letter was sent to the operators in April 2023. As a result of that pre-enforcement contact, staff were able to conduct a site visit with the operators in September 2023. The operators have installed a rain garden and two infiltration trenches, barn gutters, excluded livestock from the riparian zone and are planning to relocate their manure storage bin to be protective of water quality.

In cooperation with Whatcom Clean Water Program (WCWP) partners, Ecology nonpoint staff worked in the Nooksack River, Jordan Creek, Sumas River, and Drayton harbor watersheds to identify and address nonpoint sources of pollution. We worked with WCWP partner agencies to identify confirmed or suspected pollution sources, contact landowners, and improve livestock management practices in our watersheds, which resulted in contact with 53 property owners for technical assistance.

Over water year 2023, Ecology staff sent six technical assistance letters to property owners in the Lummi Bay watershed and 19 letters to properties in the Nooksack watershed that drain to the Portage Bay shellfish growing area. Ecology staff participate in Whatcom Clean Water Program's fall strategy which comprises of landowner contacts, county wide pollution prevention messaging, water quality monitoring during storm events, and outreach events.

During 2023, Ecology sent four technical assistance letters to property owners in the California Creek and Dakota Creek sub-watersheds of Drayton Harbor. To date, one property owner has installed fencing to keep livestock away from ditches and drainage features.

Looking ahead

Ecology staff completed the South Skagit Bay Watershed Bacteria Monitoring and Nonpoint Source Identification Assessment in July 2023. A report summarizing findings and recommendations is in development and will be shared and presented to stakeholders in late 2023. To find sources, identification sampling will continue as needed in "hot spot" areas such as Douglas Slough. As sources are identified, Ecology staff will offer technical assistance to landowners, refer them to local resources such as the conservation districts, and conduct escalating enforcement as appropriate.

Five additional Ecology Centennial/319 grants were awarded this year to fund water quality protection practices in the Northwest Region. The new grants will provide more than \$1.8 million in additional support.