



PUGET SOUNDKEEPER ALLIANCE



MEDIA ADVISORY

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State's Leading Water Protection Groups Sound the Alarm Over Dept. of Ecology's Plans to Weaken Industrial Stormwater Protections

Today, the Puget Soundkeeper Alliance, Columbia Riverkeeper, and Spokane Riverkeeper joined forces and called on the Washington Department of Ecology to abandon its plans to significantly weaken industrial stormwater protections. Industrial stormwater pollution is a leading cause of water quality impairment throughout the state, contributing heavy metals, toxic contaminants and muddy waters to the state's rivers, lakes, and sounds. In extensive public comments submitted to Ecology today, the state's leading water quality organizations lamented Ecology's plans to turn back the clock on regulating industrial stormwater pollution.

"Instead of strengthening pollution laws, Ecology's new permit allows even more toxic pollution in stormwater," said Columbia Riverkeeper Executive Director Brett VandenHeuvel. "At a time when salmon and the people who depend on them are suffering from unsafe levels of toxics, Ecology's decision flies in the face of common sense. Every citizen has the right to eat fish without fear of toxic contamination."

“Copper, zinc and other industrial toxics washing into storm drains from industrial and municipal sites account for 70% or more of Puget Sound’s pollution,” explained Puget Soundkeeper Alliance’s interim Executive Director Tom Putnam. “The National Marine Fisheries Service—the nation’s expert science agency—recognizes these heavy metals as a threat to the longevity and health of our salmon. Protecting our aquatic ecosystems requires limiting the amount of heavy metals scrap yards, logging operations, and other industries can discharge in their stormwater,” said Putnam.

Under the federal Clean Water Act, many industrial facilities must obtain a permit from Ecology to discharge polluted stormwater into rivers and streams. The strength—or weakness—of these industrial permits dictates the level of protection a waterway receives from pollutants such as copper, zinc, lead, oil and grease.

In their comments, the coalition expressed its “deep disappointment” with Ecology’s draft Industrial Stormwater General Permit. Thousands of industries are subject to industrial stormwater permits requirements, or lack thereof. The comments noted that, “[w]hile Governor Christine Gregoire, [Ecology] Director Jay Manning, and other politicians and government functionaries talk about commitment to addressing stormwater issues, in drafting general permits Ecology abdicates its proper role, forcing citizens to litigate Ecology’s illegal permits before the [Pollution Control Hearings Board] PCHB over and over again.” The organizations highlighted weaknesses in Ecology’s draft permit, including the agency’s failure to regulate critical pollutants and use of dilution factors which allow industry to discharge more pollution than under the previous permit.

“Federal law requires Ecology to ratchet down pollution over time. Here, Ecology is doing just the opposite,” said Spokane Riverkeeper and attorney Rick Eichstaedt. “The Spokane River has alarming amounts of heavy metals, PCBs, phosphorus, and other industrial chemicals. If we truly want to clean up our river, we need Ecology to hold all polluters, including industrial polluters, accountable for their impacts to river health.”

“Unfortunately this continues Ecology’s pattern of writing permits that are far from protecting ecosystem health. We will continue to protest and appeal this backsliding,” said Putnam.

Puget Soundkeeper Alliance, Columbia Riverkeeper, and Spokane Riverkeeper are non-profit, membership-based organizations with members, volunteers, and staff throughout the state. Each group is a member of the international Waterkeeper Alliance, which empowers citizens to protect their waters from polluters. Seattle-based public interest law firm Smith & Lowney drafted the comments on behalf of the organizations.

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