



October 16, 2019  
U-115626

Water Quality Permit Coordinator  
Department of Ecology Northwest Regional Office  
3190 160<sup>th</sup> Avenue SE  
Bellevue, WA 98008-5452

Subject: Washington State Department of Ecology  
Preliminary Determination of Puget Sound Nutrient General Permit Response

Dear Water Quality Permit Coordinator:

Pierce County's mission is to deliver efficient, innovative and reliable public service to enhance our community's quality of life. We promote vibrant communities, a healthier environment, effective government, and a strong entrepreneurial climate. To support these goals, Pierce County is committed to doing our part to promote a healthy Puget Sound. Our substantial investments to upgrade the Chambers Creek Regional Wastewater Treatment plant are evidence of this commitment.

A general permit for nutrient reduction in the Puget Sound has the potential to be a useful tool in addressing this issue, so long as it includes the following elements:

1. **Long-range perspective.** To ensure efficient use of resources and optimize rate-payer costs, municipalities plan capital improvements using a 20- to 30-year planning horizon. Regulations that do not consider these planning timelines undermine this efficiency. The general permit and subsequent renewals will need to be structured to allow agencies enough time to plan and implement long-term capital and operational solutions. If Ecology proceeds with general permit development, the first iteration should focus on planning efforts and the identification of operational process improvements that could be implemented to improve nutrient reduction within existing wastewater treatment plant operations in a manageable timeline. In addition, any permit requirements should consider how nutrient reduction efforts may overlap or limit a wastewater treatment plant's ability to comply with other regulations, such as air quality and biosolids permits.
2. **Nutrient Trading.** The general permit structure must also establish a trading framework amongst point sources, non-point sources, and basins. The trading program should also recognize nutrient reduction efforts already made by wastewater treatment plants to incentivize early action.

3. **Collaboration.** The general permit development and adoption process should foster a collaborative environment of stakeholders working together to develop a feasible general permit. In support of a collaborative approach, the development of a municipal stakeholder group would help guide Ecology in the development of a general permit that is cost-effective and technically feasible.
4. **Equity and Efficacy.** Ecology's focus for the initial general permit is on WWTP point source discharges into Puget Sound. However, the science being used by Ecology currently has gaps and raises questions on whether exclusively targeting point source reductions will have any measurable impact on the health of Puget Sound. A broader holistic approach to nutrient reduction which includes non-point source contributors (e.g. stormwater, agricultural, onsite septic systems) is more likely to have measurable environmental outcomes in the Puget Sound ecosystem and will ensure that all nutrient contributors are an active part of the nutrient reduction plan.
5. **Analysis and Scientific Study.** Implementation of regulatory requirements for municipal wastewater discharges in the absence of adequate scientific and modeling information on all point and nonpoint nutrient sources and the appropriate/equitable load reduction requirements will not achieve the desired water quality results. The regional nutrient reduction strategy needs to include an independent panel of scientific assessment and water quality subject matter experts to ensure that the problem is well defined and that proven, cost-effective solutions are employed to obtain the best outcome for Puget Sound. This group should also be used to provide a mechanism for regional access to and independent validation of the Salish Sea Model and the current results, guide ongoing modeling work, identify modeling gaps, and advise on future monitoring and adaptive management strategies.

The independent panel should also develop a Puget Sound specific evaluation of the cost to implement advanced wastewater treatment, including but not limited to technology, capital, and operational costs, as compared to measurable improvements to water quality. A region-specific assessment of current technologies, cost, and nutrient reduction potential for non-point sources is also necessary to determine maximum cost efficiency.

6. **Funding.** State and federal funding sources are needed for affected agencies to support the studies, planning efforts, and capital investments necessary to achieve targeted nutrient reductions. Wastewater utility ratepayers cannot be expected to shoulder the entire burden.

Pierce County does not have any additional studies or reports to submit for consideration currently. The list of proposed permittees identifies the Chambers Creek Regional Wastewater Treatment Plant as a nutrient reduction facility. However, the recently completed expansion project did not construct all improvements needed to fully perform nutrient removal. Additional improvements will be necessary to perform seasonal nutrient reductions for all projected flows.

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Pierce County will continue to actively participate in the Puget Sound regional nutrient reduction discussions and workgroups as Ecology and other stakeholders explore the development of a general permit that is equitably applied, ecologically beneficial and economically feasible.

Sincerely,



Jane Vandenberg, P.E.

Sewer Division Manager, Pierce County Planning and Public Works

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