

March 15, 2021

Eleanor Ott, P.E.
Washington State Department of Ecology
PO Box 47696
Olympia, WA 98504-7696

RE: Department of Ecology's Puget Sound Nutrient General Permit

Dear Ms. Ott:

Please accept the following comments from Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) on the Preliminary Draft Puget Sound Nutrient General Permit. SPU appreciates the effort Ecology has put into the development of the Preliminary Draft Permit and the opportunity to provide comments during the early development of the permit. As you are aware, SPU does not own or operate a wastewater treatment plant but is a component agency of the King County Regional Wastewater System and SPU customers pay almost 40% of the costs of operating the regional system. As such a large portion of the regional system our interest is in obtaining the best environmental outcomes for our customers' investments. The following comments reflect SPU's commitment to customer affordability and improvements in water quality, and it is hoped that these comments help inform development of a permit that balances customers' ability to pay with the required compliance actions and schedules.

SPU supports the recommendations from the Advisory Committee to conduct a regional study to support optimization and long-term planning. Puget Sound and the Salish Sea have many inputs of nutrients, and it is important to spend more time understanding these inputs and how point and non-point sources can be best addressed to make improvements. The regional study should evaluate available and new technologies with an emphasis on the costs and benefits of these technologies. The study should also evaluate the use of bubble permits and water quality trading to accomplish the desired outcomes around dissolved oxygen and nutrients in Puget Sound. The study should be conducted by an independent third party with an Expert Panel to oversee and verify the findings.

Communities in Puget Sound are facing multiple regulatory compliance requirements such as stormwater treatment, CSO control, asset management of aging infrastructure and expansion of utility systems to accommodate growth. These requirements have resulted in communities such as Seattle having the highest utility bills in the nation. Estimated costs for the infrastructure improvements to the King County regional system to meet the proposed requirements are staggering and could result in annual rate increases of 20+% or more. Even with our assistance programs for qualifying customers, those living at lower income levels will not be able to afford the bills associated with these rate increases and will need to make choices about living in the region or which bills to pay. Affordability of utility rates and associated bills must be considered when developing implementation schedules. While it is important to make progress toward improving Puget Sound, the region cannot do so by putting undue burdens on low income customers. EPA has recently updated its Financial Capability Assessment Guidance and SPU recommends that this guidance be used in the permit to select (or eliminate) optimization strategies, technology investments and associated implementation schedules. The regional study could consider and recommend benchmarks for the affordability metrics proposed by EPA so that improvements can be balanced against rate/bill impacts to customers.

Thank you for your consideration of SPU's comments. If you have questions or would like additional information, please contact Kevin Buckley of my staff at kevin.buckley@seattle.gov.

Sincerely,

(Submitted electronically)

Andrew Lee P.E., Deputy Director
Drainage and Wastewater Line of Business
Seattle Public Utilities