

Petition to EPA Seeks End to Illegal Permits Sucking the Oxygen from Puget Sound

What is this Petition?

On February 13, 2017, Northwest Environmental Advocates (NWEA) filed a petition with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) seeking to remove authority from the Washington Department of Ecology to issue Clean Water Act pollution discharge permits.

What does the Petition say?

NWEA shows how 103 discharge permits to Puget Sound and its tributaries issued by Ecology are unlawful because they fail to restrict nitrogen. The continued issuance of illegal permits demonstrates why EPA must take over Washington's permit program or take other action.

Why are the 103 pollution discharge permits unlawful?

The Clean Water Act prohibits Ecology from issuing permits for discharges that cause or contribute to violations of water quality standards. Levels of dissolved oxygen in Puget Sound, necessary to sustain aquatic life, are violating Washington standards. Ecology's many years of studies show that municipal and industrial discharges of nitrogen are the source of the problem.

How does nitrogen affect water quality?

Once discharged, nitrogen sucks oxygen out of the water. In addition, nitrogen is a fertilizer, causing massive increases in algal blooms. Not only do some algae release toxins, once they die and decay the algae consumes yet additional oxygen from the water.

What happens to Puget Sound species when dissolved oxygen levels drop?

Species that require oxygen, such as threatened and endangered salmon and steelhead, are harmed by low oxygen levels. Jellyfish, which thrive on very low oxygen, proliferate. Studies demonstrate that as jellyfish populations are exploding, forage fish such as herring are declining.

How much do municipal discharges contribute to the violations?

Ecology's studies show that over 80 percent of Puget Sound human-source nitrogen loads in summer and over 60 percent annually are discharged by municipal sewage treatment plants.

Why doesn't Ecology issue permits with nitrogen controls?

Nitrogen limits in permits would require nitrogen removal technology on sewage treatment plants that discharge to Puget Sound. Ecology wants to avoid costing polluters money.

What else could Ecology do to control nitrogen?

Ecology could control non-point sources of nitrogen, such as on-site septic systems and farms. In December 2016, NWEA sued federal agencies to force Washington to control these and other types of non-point source pollution, particularly in coastal watersheds of Puget Sound. 2/2017