



Focus

Longview Ditches water cleanup planning update

Background

The Washington Department of Ecology (Ecology) is seeking assistance from citizens, industry and local government in Longview and Kelso to help solve water quality problems in the Longview Ditches. It will take voluntary help from many who live and work in the community to clean up these waters for current and future generations.

The ditches are a series of human-made drainage ditches built in the 1920s to remove storm water from low-land areas of the Longview and Kelso. A pumping system helps the ditches carry excess water away from Longview and Kelso during times of heavy rainfall. The water is then discharged to the Columbia and Cowlitz rivers and to Coal Creek Slough.

The ditches receive storm water from many industrial and commercial facilities, private residences, as well as the City and Port of Longview.

Ecology sampled the Longview Ditches in 1983 and again in 1992 and found significant pollution problems. In 1999, the Longview Ditches were put on the list of the state's most polluted waters for failing to meet water quality standards for fecal coliform, dissolved oxygen, turbidity and lead. In addition, sediments in the ditches are contaminated with hydrocarbons, oil and grease, cyanide and metals (lead and chromium) – which are toxic to humans and aquatic life.

Federal law requires cleanup of polluted waters

Since waters of the ditches are considered “waters of the state,” they fall under the jurisdiction of the federal Clean Water Act. The Act requires states to identify sources of pollution in waters that fall short of water quality standards and to determine how much of each kind of pollution the waters can receive and still remain healthy. A set of pollutant allocations for that water body, based on sampling data and computer modeling, is called a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL), or water cleanup plan.

Ecology is now starting the water-quality cleanup planning process for the Longview Ditches. After broad participation by local authorities, industries and citizens, Ecology will submit to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) a final water cleanup plan for Longview Ditches.

Storm water most-likely pollution source to Longview Ditches

Extensive development, and the pavement that goes along with it, blocks water that would naturally go back into the ground. Development eliminates trees and wetlands that would normally absorb water. During heavy rainfall in such areas, storm water cannot find its way back into the ground. Surface water travels over paved areas, picking up a variety of toxic substances along the way, such as gasoline, oil and industrial solvents. This polluted storm water is most likely the major source of pollution to the Longview Ditches.

Some of the industrial sites have Ecology-administered storm-water permits, but many of the smaller sites do not. The storm-water permit requires industries to develop and fully implement Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plans. The plan consists of management practices the facility can implement to prevent or eliminate stormwater contamination. The permit helps block storm water pollution because it does not allow the discharge of contaminated stormwater.

What happens because of poor water quality

Clean, cool water is important for people and for fish. A dirty creek, or in this case drainage ditch, can be a health threat to people. If left unchecked, it could even decrease property values. Even though the ditches are not inhabited by runs of native fish, water from the ditches drains to fish-bearing rivers. Fish runs in the lower Columbia River face Federal Endangered Species Act listings, which could mean greater restrictions posed by the federal government.

How you can get involved

Ecology will be working with local interests – including government, industries, interest groups and neighboring residents -- to develop a water cleanup plan that works for everybody. For it to be successful, Ecology needs to involve as many as possible in developing the plan.

Ecology will soon form a broad-based advisory committee representing these interests to develop a water cleanup plan for the Longview Ditches.

For more information

To get involved or to be placed on Ecology's mailing list to receive information about Longview Ditches water cleanup planning, contact Dave Howard, Department of Ecology, Vancouver Field Office, 2108 Grand Boulevard, Vancouver, WA 98661-4622; telephone: 360-690-4796; e-mail: dhow461@ecy.wa.gov.