

SEPA Rule Making Round 1: Preliminary Draft proposed WAC 197-11 revisions

The following revisions are proposed to the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) administrative rules in Washington Administrative Code (WAC) 197-11. These are preliminary draft proposals for comment. This opportunity is provided prior to initiation of the formal CR-102 review process. The topics for this 2012 SEPA rule update are delineated in SB 6406 Section 301.

Comments on this draft need to be provided by COB October 5, 2012 to fran.sant@ecy.wa.gov. If you have questions, please call Fran Sant at (360) 407-6932 or send inquiries to her email address. We greatly appreciate your assistance.

Preliminary Proposed WAC 197-11 revisions

The following WACs are proposed for revision. Overview of key provisions is provided for each group of proposed amendments, followed by rule language draft revisions. The proposed WAC revisions in this document are:

Pages 2-3 - Conceptual alternatives and overview of proposal.

Pages 4-6 - Minor new construction optional thresholds: WAC 197-11-800(1) and WAC 197-11-508 SEPA Register

Page 7 - Electrical facilities thresholds: WAC 197-11-800(23)

Pages 8-11 - Environmental Checklist Efficiency: WACs 197-11-315, -906 and -960

Minor New Construction Optional Thresholds: WAC 197-11-800(1) and WAC 197-11-508 SEPA Register

Conceptual alternatives: Proposals A and B

Ecology requests comments on two conceptual approaches to increasing the optional higher thresholds for minor construction under WAC 197-11-800(1). The exemption levels for these two concepts are summarized in the table below.

Proposal A would add a new “Tier 2” of higher optional threshold levels. These new threshold levels would have new procedural requirements, including findings and continued provision of notice of newly-exempted project types. The preliminary draft rule language for WAC 197-11-800(1)(c) provided in this document would implement Proposal A.

Proposal B would be a simpler approach. The current upper optional thresholds would be revised with no additional procedural requirements. The “Tier 2” provisions in subsection WAC 197-11-800(1)(c) of the draft WAC would not apply in Proposal B. Instead, the maximum levels listed in existing subsection (c) would be updated to apply within Urban Growth Areas (UGAs) and non-UGA areas as shown in the table below. In this proposed concept, the findings and notice provisions in the draft proposed WAC language would not apply to Proposal B. The proposed revisions to WAC 197-11-800(1)(a) and (b) in this document would apply to both Proposal A and Proposal B.

Levels	Current minimum	Proposal A – Add new “Tier 2” optional maximum thresholds; retain existing optional levels as “Tier 1”			Proposal B – Raise current optional thresholds	
		Tier 1 All	Tier 2 UGA	Tier 2 Non UGA	Tier 1a UGA	Tier 1b Non UGA
Single family residential [# of units]	4	20	40	25	25	20
Multifamily residential [# of unit]	4	20	80	25	40	20
Agricultural [sq ft]	10K	30K	40K	60K	30	40
Office, school, commercial + parking [sq ft + # of spots]	4K+20	12K + 40	40K + 120	12K + 40	20K + 60	12K + 40
Landfill or excavation [cu yds]	100	500	1000	1000	750	750

Overview of Preliminary Proposed WAC Amendments

Several WAC revisions are proposed to increase optional SEPA thresholds that local governments may adopt for specified types of minor new construction. These include:

- WAC 197-11-800(1) subsections(1)(b)(i) and (ii) - Residential uses: A new “multi-family” category for thresholds was stipulated by SB 6406. Thus, we propose dividing the original “residential” category into “single-family” and “multi-family” categories.
- Subsection (1)(vi) – Landfill and excavation: Clarification is needed to ensure that this subsection is implemented in harmony with another WAC section on grading and filling: WAC 197-11-800(2)(d) (“Other minor new construction”). This other section exempts from SEPA review all “grading, excavating, filling...necessary for any building...exempted by subsections (1) or (2).” The proposed revisions are intended to harmonize implementation of the two exemption sections addressing grading and filling.
- Subsection (c) – Submittal requirement: Delete requirement to submit adopted local SEPA ordinance revisions to Ecology. Ordinances are now available through internet searches and other sources.
- Subsection (c) –Tier 1 and Tier 2 optional higher thresholds (Proposal A as described above):
 - The existing optional thresholds would be titled Tier 1. There is no change to adoption process or other provisions related to these existing optional thresholds.
 - A new set of higher optional thresholds are proposed, titled Tier 2. A more definitive finding is required for adopting these higher thresholds. The thresholds are divided into two geographic areas: Incorporated/UGA and other unincorporated areas. The consideration of variable thresholds for various geographic settings was directed in SB 6406. The two groupings are proposed to address the varying conditions typically present in urban and rural areas.
 - The various optional thresholds are provided in a table, rather than text, for clarity.
- Notification of Tier 2 exempted projects (Proposal A only):
 - WAC 197-11-800(c)(iv) proposes to require publication in the SEPA register for projects exempted under Tier 2. No other SEPA procedures would be required for these projects. SEPA register notification is required; other notice will be guided by the adopted procedures of the lead agency.
 - WAC 197-11-508 SEPA Register: Revised to add notification of Tier 2 exempted projects as a type of notification included in the SEPA Register.

Preliminary Proposed Rule Amendments

WAC 197-11-800

(1) Minor new construction -- Flexible thresholds.

(a) The exemptions in this subsection apply to all licenses required to undertake the construction in question, except when a rezone or any license governing emissions to the air or discharges to water is required. To be exempt under this subsection, the project must be equal to or smaller than the exempt level. For a specific proposal, the exempt level in (b) of this subsection shall control, unless the city/county in which the project is located establishes an exempt level under (c) of this subsection. If the proposal is located in more than one city/county, the lower of the agencies' adopted levels shall control, regardless of which agency is the lead agency.

(b) The following types of construction shall be exempt, except when undertaken wholly or partly on lands covered by water:

(i) The construction or location of ~~any four detached single family residential structures of four dwelling units.~~

(ii) The construction or location of multi-family residential structure(s) containing 4 dwelling units (including duplexes and other multi-unit structures.)

~~(iii)~~ (iii) The construction of a barn, loafing shed, farm equipment storage building, produce storage or packing structure, or similar agricultural structure, covering 10,000 square feet, and to be used only by the property owner or his or her agent in the conduct of farming the property. This exemption shall not apply to feed lots.

~~(iii)~~ (iv) The construction of an office, school, commercial, recreational, service or storage building with 4,000 square feet of gross floor area, and with associated parking facilities designed for twenty automobiles. This exemption includes stand-alone parking lots.

~~(iv) The construction of a parking lot designed for twenty automobiles.~~

(v) Any stand-alone landfill or excavation of 100 cubic yards throughout the total lifetime of the fill or excavation not associated with an exempt project listed above; and any fill or excavation classified as a Class I, II, or III forest practice under RCW 76.09.050 or regulations thereunder.

(c) Optional higher thresholds.

(i) Tier 1 optional higher thresholds: Cities, towns or counties may raise the exempt levels to the Tier 1 maximum specified in Table 1 below by implementing ordinance or resolution. Such levels shall be specified in the agency's SEPA procedures (WAC 197-11-904) ~~and sent to the department of ecology.~~ A newly established exempt level shall be supported by local conditions, including zoning or other land use plans or regulations. An agency may adopt a system of several exempt levels (such as different levels for different geographic areas). The maximum Tier 1 exempt levels for the exemptions in (1)(b) of this section are identified on Table 1. shall be, respectively:

~~(i) 20 dwelling units.~~

~~(ii) 30,000 square feet.~~

~~—(iii) 12,000 square feet; 40 automobiles.~~

~~—(iv) 40 automobiles.~~

~~—(v) 500 cubic yards.~~

(ii) Tier 2 optional thresholds: In addition to the provisions of subsection (i) above, a newly established Tier 2 exemption level shall be supported by findings that the requirements for environmental analysis, protection, and mitigation for the exempted types of development have been adequately addressed in development regulations and comprehensive plans adopted under chapter 36.70A RCW, and in other applicable local, state, or federal laws or rules. The city, town or county shall explain how these existing requirements adequately avoid, minimize or otherwise compensate for probable significant impacts with analysis and findings relevant to each element of the environment. Separate maximum optional thresholds are established in Table 1 for incorporated areas and unincorporated Urban Growth Areas; and for other unincorporated areas.

(iii) Table 1 - Optional Tier 1 and Tier 2 thresholds:

<u>Levels</u>	<u>Tier 1 upper thresholds</u>	<u>Tier 2 upper thresholds: City and unincorporated UGA</u>	<u>Tier 2 upper thresholds: Unincorporated areas not included in UGA</u>
<u>(i) Single family residential [number of units]</u>	<u>20</u>	<u>40</u>	<u>25</u>
<u>(ii) Multifamily residential [number of units]</u>	<u>20</u>	<u>80</u>	<u>25</u>
<u>(iii) Agricultural [square feet]</u>	<u>30,000</u>	<u>40,000</u>	<u>60,000</u>
<u>(iv) Office, school, commercial + parking [square feet and number of spots]</u>	<u>12,000 + 40</u>	<u>40,000 + 120</u>	<u>12,000 + 40</u>
<u>(vi) Landfill or excavation [cubic yards]</u>	<u>500</u>	<u>1,000</u>	<u>1,000</u>

(iv) Notice for projects exempted under subsection (ii): The agency shall ensure that notice is provided for projects exempted under Tier 2 optional thresholds in subsection (ii). Notice shall include submittal of a brief summary of the proposal for publication on the SEPA register as provided in WAC 197-11-508.

WAC 197-11-508 SEPA Register

(1) The department of ecology shall prepare a SEPA register at least weekly, giving notice of all environmental documents required to be sent to the department of ecology under these rules, specifically:

- (a) DNSs under WAC 197-11-340(2);
- (b) DSs (scoping notices) under WAC 197-11-408;
- (c) EISs under WAC 197-11-455, 197-11-460, 197-11-620, and 197-11-630;
- (d) Notices of action under RCW 43.21C.080 and 43.21C.087; and
- (e) Notices in the optional DNS process under WAC 197-11-355 (2)(d)(i) and (5).

(f) Notice of projects exempted from SEPA review as provided in WAC 197-11-800(c)(iv).

(2) All agencies shall submit the environmental documents listed in subsection (1) of this section to the department promptly and in accordance with procedures established by the department.

(3) Agencies are encouraged to refer to the SEPA register for notice of SEPA documents which may affect them.

(4) The department:

(a) Shall establish the method for distributing the SEPA register, which may include listing on internet, publishing and mailing to interested persons, or any other method deemed appropriate by the department.

(b) May establish a reasonable format for the SEPA register;

(c) May charge a reasonable fee for the SEPA register as allowed by law, in at least the amount allowed by chapter 42.17 RCW, from agencies, members of the public, and interested organizations.

(5) Members of the public, citizen and community groups, and educational institutions are encouraged to refer to the SEPA register for notice of SEPA actions which may affect them.

Electrical Facilities Thresholds: WAC 197-11-800(23)

Overview of Preliminary Proposed Amendments

Increasing SEPA thresholds for electrical facilities was stipulated as a topic for this rulemaking in SB 6406. Brief description of key provisions:

- Electrical utilities indicate that modern distribution lines are often being constructed at 115,000 volts. Thus, the limit of 55,000 volts used as the existing SEPA exemption threshold is outdated and needs to be amended to reflect current practice.
- Electrical transmission lines may be designed to carry 115,000 volts. While electrical distribution lines are commonly located in road rights-of-way, transmission lines may be located in off-ROW utility corridors. “Cross-country” transmission line construction projects may have potential for significant adverse impact on the environment. Therefore, it is proposed that the electrical facility exemption would not apply when new lines are proposed outside established rights-of-way or developed utility easements.

Proposed Rule Amendments

WAC 197-11-800(23) (excerpt of amended section)

(23) **Utilities.** The utility-related actions listed below shall be exempt, except for installation, construction, or alteration on lands covered by water. The exemption includes installation and construction, relocation when required by other governmental bodies, repair, replacement, maintenance, operation or alteration that does not change the action from an exempt class. . . .

(c) All electric facilities, lines, equipment or appurtenances, not including substations, installed within existing improved rights-of-way and developed utility corridors, with an associated voltage of ~~55,000~~ 115,000 volts or less; and the overbuilding of existing distribution lines (55,000 volts or less) with transmission lines (~~more than 55,000 volts~~ up to 115,000 volts) installed within existing improved rights-of-way and developed utility corridors; and the undergrounding of all electric facilities, lines, equipment or appurtenances.

Environmental Checklist Efficiency: WACs 197-11-315, -906 and -960

Overview of Preliminary Proposed Amendments

Improving efficiency of the environmental checklist is a stipulated topic for this rulemaking, per SB 6406. Three related sections of the rule are proposed for amendment.

- WAC 197-11-315:
 - Updated to reflect provisions in SB 6406 section 308 (now RCW 43.21c.460) that provide new flexibility for lead agencies. Lead agencies may identify in the checklist “a locally adopted ordinance, development regulation, land use plan, or other legal authority” that addresses impacts from a proposal on a particular element of the natural or built environment.
 - Electronic submittal is proposed to be expressly allowed, including allowance for electronic signature. This will facilitate electronic submittal of checklists to lead agencies, which will improve efficiency of the process for all parties.
- WAC 197-11-906: Provision deleted that precluded “altering” questions on the checklist, as this could conflict with reforms adopted in SB 6406 and provisions of the proposed rule update.
- WAC 197-11-960: Nonproject proposals are required to complete the supplemental nonpoint proposal questions, but do not need to complete the full environmental checklist when it is not useful to analysis of the proposal. Many local governments have noted that the detailed environmental checklist is generally not useful for review of nonproject actions like plan or ordinance adoption.

Preliminary Proposed Rule Amendments

197-11-315 Environmental checklist.

(1) Agencies shall use the environmental checklist substantially in the form found in WAC [197-11-960](#) to assist in making threshold determinations for proposals, except for:

- (a) Public proposals on which the lead agency has decided to prepare its own EIS; or
- (b) Proposals on which the lead agency and applicant agree an EIS will be prepared; or
- (c) Projects which are proposed as planned actions (see subsection (2) of this section) ; or

(d) Projects where questions on the checklist are adequately covered by a locally adopted ordinance, development regulation, land use plan, or other legal authority (see subsection (6) of this section; or.

(e) Nonproject proposals where the questions in Part B do not provide meaningfully to the analysis of the proposal. In such cases, part D shall be completed.

(2) For projects submitted as planned actions under WAC [197-11-164](#), a GMA county/city shall use the existing environmental checklist or modify the environmental checklist form to fulfill the purposes outlined in WAC [197-11-172](#)(1), notwithstanding the requirements of WAC [197-11-906](#)(4).

If the GMA county/city chooses to modify the existing environmental checklist, the modified form shall be submitted to the department of ecology to allow at least a thirty-day review prior to use. The department shall

notify the GMA county/city within thirty days of receipt if it has any objections to the modified form and the general nature of the objections. If the department objects, the modified form shall not be used until the GMA county/city and the department have reached agreement.

(3) Agencies may use an environmental checklist whenever it would assist in their planning and decision making, but shall only require an applicant to prepare a checklist under SEPA if a checklist is required by subsection (1) of this section.

(4) The lead agency shall prepare the checklist or require an applicant to prepare the checklist.

(5) The items in the environmental checklist are not weighted. The mention of one or many adverse environmental impacts does not necessarily mean that the impacts are significant. Conversely, a probable significant adverse impact on the environment may result in the need for an EIS.

(6) The lead agency for an environmental review under this chapter may identify within the checklist provided to applicants instances where questions on the checklist are adequately covered by a locally adopted ordinance, development regulation, land use plan, or other legal authority. A lead agency still must consider whether the action has an impact on the particular element or elements of the environment in question.

(a) In instances where the locally adopted ordinance, development regulation, land use plan, or other legal authority provide the necessary information to answer a specific question, the lead agency must explain how the proposed project satisfies the underlying local legal authority.

(b) If the lead agency identifies instances where questions on the checklist are adequately covered by a locally adopted ordinance, development regulation, land use plan, or other legal authority, an applicant may still provide answers to any questions on the checklist.

(c) Nothing in this section authorizes a lead agency to ignore or delete a question on the checklist.

(7) The lead agency may determine the appropriate methods for receipt of electronic submittals of the checklist from applicants including electronic signature of part C of the checklist.

(8) Lead agencies may include helpful information (including web links) in the checklist to assist applicants in completing the questions.

197-11-906 Content and consistency of agency procedures.

(1)(a) Agency SEPA policies and procedures shall implement and be consistent with the rules in this chapter. Unless optional or permissive (see WAC [197-11-704](#)), all of the provisions of this chapter are mandatory, and agency procedures shall incorporate these rules and criteria.

(b) Permissive and optional rules shall *not* be construed as mandatory requirements. Rules giving encouragement or guidance shall also not be construed as mandatory. The decision on whether to apply an optional provision rests with the responsible official.

(c) Except as stated in the next subsection, the rules in this chapter are not exclusive, and agencies may add procedures and criteria. However, any additional material shall not be inconsistent with, contradict, or make compliance with any provision of these rules a practical impossibility. Any additional material shall be consistent with SEPA.

(d) Agency procedures shall also include the procedures required by sections WAC [197-11-055](#) (3)(a) and

(4), 197-11-420 (1) and (4), and 197-11-910.

(e) Agency procedures may include procedures under WAC [197-11-055](#) (2) and (7), 197-11-100(3), 197-11-680, 197-11-714(2), 197-11-800(1), and 197-11-908. Any such procedures shall include the content required by those rules.

(2) The following provisions of this chapter are exclusive and may not be added to or changed in agency procedures:

(a) The definitions of "proposal," "major," "action," "significant," "affecting," "environment," "categorical exemption," "agencies with jurisdiction," "lands covered by water," "built environment," "natural environment," "license," "licensing," "mitigation," and "scope";

(b) The criteria for lead agency determination (Part Ten of these rules);

(c) The categorical exemptions in Part Nine of these rules, unless expressly allowed under Part Nine;

(d) The information allowed to be required of applicants under WAC [197-11-080](#), [197-11-100](#), [197-11-335](#), and [197-11-420](#);

(e) The requirements for the style and size of an EIS (WAC [197-11-425](#));

(f) The list of elements of the environment (WAC [197-11-444](#)); and

(g) The provisions on substantive authority and mitigation in WAC [197-11-660](#).

(3) The following provisions of this chapter may not be changed, but may be added to; any additions shall meet the criteria for additional material stated in subsection (1)(c) of this section:

(a) All other definitions in Part Eight of these rules;

(b) The provisions in Parts Four and Five of these rules, except as necessary to be grammatically incorporated into agency procedures;

(c) The contents of agency SEPA procedures (WAC [197-11-906](#)); and

(d) The list of agencies with environmental expertise (WAC [197-11-920](#)).

(4) The forms in Part Eleven shall be used substantially as set forth. Minor changes are allowed to make the forms more useful to agencies, applicants, and the public, as long as the changes do not eliminate requested information or impose burdens on applicants. ~~The questions in Part Two of the environmental checklist shall not be altered.~~

197-11-960 Environmental checklist (excerpt of section proposed for revision)

Purpose of checklist.

The State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA), chapter [43.21C](#) RCW, requires all governmental agencies to consider the environmental impacts of a proposal before making decisions. An environmental impact

statement (EIS) must be prepared for all proposals with probable significant adverse impacts on the quality of the environment. The purpose of this checklist is to provide information to help you and the agency identify impacts from your proposal (and to reduce or avoid impacts from the proposal, if it can be done) and to help the agency decide whether an EIS is required.

Instructions for applicants:

This environmental checklist asks you to describe some basic information about your proposal. Governmental agencies use this checklist to determine whether the environmental impacts of your proposal are significant, requiring preparation of an EIS. Answer the questions briefly, with the most precise information known, or give the best description you can.

You must answer each question accurately and carefully, to the best of your knowledge. In most cases, you should be able to answer the questions from your own observations or project plans without the need to hire experts. If you really do not know the answer, or if a question does not apply to your proposal, write "do not know" or "does not apply." Complete answers to the questions now may avoid unnecessary delays later.

Some questions ask about governmental regulations, such as zoning, shoreline, and landmark designations. Answer these questions if you can. If you have problems, the governmental agencies can assist you.

The checklist questions apply to all parts of your proposal, even if you plan to do them over a period of time or on different parcels of land. Attach any additional information that will help describe your proposal or its environmental effects. The agency to which you submit this checklist may ask you to explain your answers or provide additional information reasonably related to determining if there may be significant adverse impact.

Use of checklist for nonproject proposals:

Complete this checklist for nonproject proposals, including the supplemental sheet for non project actions (part D). When the questions for the environmental elements (part B) do not contribute meaningfully to the analysis of the proposal, they may be excluded. even though questions may be answered "does not apply." ~~IN ADDITION, complete the SUPPLEMENTAL SHEET FOR NONPROJECT ACTIONS (part D).~~

~~Complete the SUPPLEMENTAL SHEET FOR NONPROJECT ACTIONS (part D).~~

For nonproject actions, the references in the checklist to the words "project," "applicant," and "property or site" should be read as "proposal," "proposer," and "affected geographic area," respectively.