

Course Change in Washington's Water Quality Assessment

The last time Ecology's Water Quality Assessment (WQA) team met with the WQ Partnership, we explained a proposed course of action for the next WQA. This plan of action has changed, requiring us to modify our approach for the 2010 and 2012 Water Quality Assessment (WQA). This change should allow us to adhere to a realistic schedule and meet expectations for producing the WQA more consistently every 2 years.

Background

The Water Quality Program at Ecology has been attempting to produce 303d lists and more recently Water Quality Assessments (or Integrated Reports in EPA jargon) in even numbered years with limited success. We have typically been two years late and overwhelmed with all the data and coordination that are involved. We are beginning to get better control over the assessment process with the Watershed Assessment Tracking System (WATS) mapping and database tool, use of the Environmental Information Management (EIM) database for the data repository, full-time list maintenance, and documented policy for the assessment.

Original Plan

The most frequently changing factor over the years has been the freshwater segmenting system that identifies the geographical boundaries for the listed segments. The 2010 WQA was to be the latest, and perhaps most permanent, freshwater segment scheme as we convert to the national hydrography dataset (NHD), which defines freshwater stream boundaries on a hydrologic basis. Mapping issues have caused several months delay in translating the currently approved 2008 WQA to the NHD system, meaning that we will not be able to consider new data for fresh waters until 2012.

Proposed Plan

Because of the delay in converting to NHD, the significant amount of data, and the complexity of our assessment work, we have made a decision to start rotating marine and fresh water assessments in four year cycles. This means that our 2010 list will be focused on marine waters and our 2012 assessment will focus on fresh waters. Besides helping manage the workload, this will also provide us with more time to work on converting the fresh water segment system to the national standard.

EPA representatives expressed a willingness to approve a 2010 WQA based on assessing data, new and pre-existing, for marine waters. This approach fits in with their new guidance for accepting assessments using the "rotating basin approach." The primary purpose of this approach is to recognize the enormous quantity of data that some states have amassed and the need to limit the focus to more manageable chunks. In our case, we will begin rotating between marine and freshwater every two years.

The conversion of freshwater segments to the NHD will continue to be worked on with the goal of being ready for the freshwater data assessment in the 2012 cycle. This allows us to focus on marine and sediment data assessment and policy during the 2010 cycle. The calls for data

which precede each WQA will be replaced with a public notice of an upcoming data retrieval from EIM for either a marine or freshwater assessment (depending on the focus). EIM will continue to be promoted as a repository for all data that feeds every WQA and we will continue to encourage data submitters to submit their data to EIM continuously, rather than wait until Ecology announces the next listing cycle retrieval. Our goal is to have a continuous listing cycle to the degree that we can, in order to smooth out workload and ensure that data submittals are up to date and current..

Proposed Outcome

Ecology will begin the 2010 WQA cycle with a scheduled State Register notice of the call for data on August 5, 2009. Marine water and sediment listings will change based on EPA approval of the submitted WQA in 2010. The 2008 freshwater listings for the most part will remain unchanged until EPA approves a 2012 list. EPA has agreed in principle to continual changes between categories 5 and 4A as a result of TMDLs that are approved by EPA between listing cycles..

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