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## Water much cleaner in Chehalis basin

JOHN DODGE; Staff writer

Bacterial pollution problems in the sprawling Chehalis River Basin are on the mend, according to the latest data supplied by state environmental officials.

About 80 percent of the 93 water-quality monitoring stations in the river basin that failed fecal coliform standards from 1996 through 2004 now meet water quality standards.

The remaining 15 sample sites also likely meet the standards, but they haven't been tested yet, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Improved water quality in the 2,660-square-mile river basin – second only to the Columbia River in size in this state – is the result of a concerted effort by local, state and federal partners to tackle pollution sources, including agricultural runoff and failing residential and commercial septic systems.

“The partners in this watershed have been working well together, and it shows,” said Dave Rounry, water cleanup coordinator for the state Department of Ecology.

In addition, more than \$90 million in state grants and loans has been used in the past five years to build new sewage treatment plants in Chehalis and Centralia and upgrade seven others in the watershed.

Rounry said a big difference-maker has been a 1998 state law that required dairy farmers to better manage their livestock waste.

The Chehalis River watershed, which flows through Lewis and south Thurston and Grays Harbor counties before emptying into Grays Harbor, supports an economically important shellfish industry, sport and tribal fisheries and other recreational use. Those uses and the health of people coming into contact with the water are threatened when bacteria levels from human and animal waste exceed safe levels.

Some of the other activities in the watershed that have curbed the flow of bacterial pollution include:

- Forest landowners have improved 371 acres of streamside habitat.
- More than 4,800 acres of habitat in the upper watershed have been permanently protected.
- Farmers have planted along or fenced off 56 miles of shoreline to keep livestock out of streams.

- The watershed partners completed a pollution budget for the river basin in 2004 to guide projects and priorities in an area with some 3,300 miles of rivers and streams.

“These improvements in water quality are most impressive,” said Janet Strong, president of the Chehalis Basin Land Trust and a trustee of the Chehalis River Council. “Even more inspiring are the strong partnerships formed by so many groups and individuals.”

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