

Water Quality Standards: Updating Human Health Criteria

The Department of Ecology (Ecology) initiated a rule revision on September 13, 2012. The intent is to update and adopt new human health criteria in the Water Quality Standards for Surface Waters of the State of Washington - Chapter 173-201A WAC.

What are human health criteria?

Human health criteria are numeric limits on toxic substances that are set to protect people who consume water, fish, or shellfish from Washington's water bodies. The toxics criteria include substances such as metals, pesticides, and other organic compounds found in the environment.

Why do we need new human health criteria?

Human health criteria applied to surface waters of the state are currently found in the federal National Toxics Rule (NTR), issued to the state by the USEPA in 1992. Since that time, new science and information have emerged that require consideration for updating the criteria. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) encourages states to adopt human health criteria directly into their own state rules, rather than continue to rely on the outdated NTR.

How would the human health criteria change?

New data and information will be reviewed and analyzed to determine their applicability to ensuring the protection of Washington's surface waters used by people for fishing, harvesting shellfish, and drinking.

The process of developing new human health criteria will also take into account factors used to calculate each chemical criterion including risk, duration of exposure, and more accurate data about how much fish and shellfish people eat in Washington State.

MORE INFORMATION

Read more about human health criteria rulemaking activities:
www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/sqs/humanhealthcrit.html

Read more about all current Water Quality Standards rulemaking activities:
www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/sqs/Currswqsruleactiv.html

Join our ListServ to receive news and information about water quality from the Department of Ecology:
<http://listserv.wa.gov/cgi-bin/wa?A0=ECOLOGY-WATER-QUALITY-INFO>

Learn more about Reducing Toxics in Fish, Sediments and Water:
www.ecy.wa.gov/toxics/fish.html

Contact information

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Why is it important for Ecology to adopt new human health criteria?

The current human health criteria issued to Washington in federal rule are outdated and do not reflect the latest Pacific Northwest information on fish and shellfish consumed by people in Washington, especially people who eat a lot of fish and shellfish, such as tribal members.

How will these changes affect me?

The water quality standards are the basis for protecting and regulating the quality of surface waters in Washington State. They guide Washington citizens, businesses, and other government agencies to the goal of sustaining clean water for current and future use.

It is likely that new studies and data will lead to decisions that set lower, more protective levels on the majority of the human health criteria than are currently in place. In some cases these new criteria will result in more protective discharge limits for those industries and municipalities that discharge wastewater. These limits may also be challenging for industries and municipalities to achieve in the short term. Recognizing this, Ecology has initiated a concurrent rule making to develop and enhance implementation tools that can be used to keep dischargers in compliance as they work towards achieving criteria. The proposed changes will provide predictable regulatory tools for application of criteria to help entities comply with existing and new source control requirements or discharge limits. The changes will allow for compliance with requirements while they effectively work toward meeting permit limits and control sources of pollutants.

How can I be involved?

Over the next several months Ecology will host a series of Policy Forums to involve the public as the agency addresses the complex science and public policy issues around adopting new human health-based water quality criteria. Determining how restrictive, and how protective to make those new criteria, will be addressed as a part of the Policy Forums discussions. Ecology is committed to being as clear as we can about what is required in law and regulation, and where we have choices in determining levels of protection. We invite the public to participate in these discussions as we move towards adopting new human health criteria.

How can I find out more information?

To find out more about the Surface Water Quality Standards rule makings and Policy Forums: www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/swqs/Currswqsruleactiv.html

To find out more about human health criteria and Ecology's efforts to revise the Surface Water Quality Standards, contact:

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