

# PHOSPHORUS

## Phosphorus

Brochure

Lake Whatcom Cooperative Management

## Reducing Phosphorus

Website

Washington State Department of Ecology

[www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/nonpoint/phosphorus/PhosphorusBan.html](http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/nonpoint/phosphorus/PhosphorusBan.html)

## Nutrients in our Lakes and Streams

Flyer

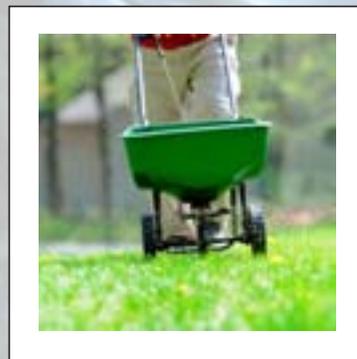
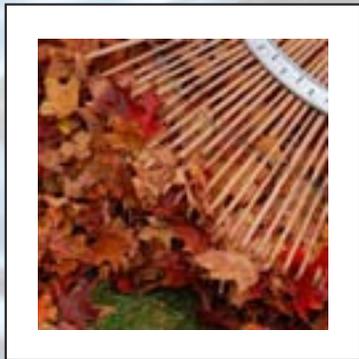
Washington State Department of Ecology

## Dissolved Oxygen in Lakes

Website

Washington State Department of Ecology

[www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/plants/management/joymanual/dissolvedoxygen.html](http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/plants/management/joymanual/dissolvedoxygen.html)



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# Protect Your Drinking Water

## Phosphorus



A PARTNERSHIP OF WHATCOM COUNTY  
CITY OF BELLINGHAM  
LAKE WHATCOM WATER & SEWER DISTRICT

# Protect Your Drinking Water



## Phosphorus

is a naturally occurring nutrient found in water, soil, and air. It helps stimulate plant growth and is essential for animal and plant life. You may recognize it as a common ingredient in fertilizers.

### Too Much of a Good Thing

Naturally balanced levels of phosphorus promote natural levels of growth. Human activities are increasing phosphorus levels in the lake. When excess amounts of phosphorus are introduced into a waterway some plant species, such as algae, experience explosive growth. Overgrowth of algae clouds water, blocking sunlight from other plants and aquatic life, killing them or limiting their growth.

When algae die, they sink to the bottom of the lake and begin to decompose. Bacteria feed on the decomposing algae and consume oxygen in the water. This process can deplete oxygen levels in the lake to a level that is too low to support plant and animal life. In addition, dead algae creates more nutrients to fertilize even more algal growth, accelerating the depletion of oxygen in the lake.

### Where Does Phosphorus Come From?

Sources of phosphorus from our neighborhoods and homes include:

- Lawn fertilizers
- Leaves and grass clippings
- Pesticides
- Exposed soil from construction and landscaping
- Pet and wildlife droppings
- Failing septic systems
- Automobile exhaust and car washing
- Phosphorus-based soaps, detergents, and chemicals



### How Does Phosphorus Get into the Lake?

Phosphorus is carried into the lake by run-off from rain-water or outdoor water use. Land clearing exposes soil, allowing it to be washed away by rain. Hard or impervious surfaces, such as roads, rooftops and patios, allow water to run off quickly and carry phosphorus-containing pollutants, such as motor oils, fuels, and detergents, directly into lakes and streams or into storm drains that lead to the nearest lake or stream.



### It's The Law

No person shall apply any commercial fertilizer to residential lawns or public properties within the Lake Whatcom Watershed, either liquid or granular, that is labeled as containing more than 0% phosphorus or other compounds containing phosphorus, such as phosphate, except when applied to newly established turf or lawn areas in the first growing season.

No commercial fertilizer of any type shall be applied when the ground is frozen.

No person shall apply, spill, or otherwise deposit commercial fertilizer on impervious surfaces. Any fertilizer applied, spilled or deposited, either intentionally or accidentally, on impervious surfaces shall be immediately and completely removed.

City of Bellingham Ordinance 2005-06-044  
Whatcom County Ordinance 2005-038

# Protect Your Drinking Water

# YOU CAN HELP!

## Lawns and Gardens

- Fertilize only when necessary with a phosphorus-free fertilizer such as the Lake Whatcom Blend.
- Reduce the amount of grass in your landscape. Try native ground covers that require less mowing and fertilizer. Soil covered with plants acts like a natural sponge and filter, slowing down runoff and reducing the amount of pollutants that can reach the lake.
- Plant or leave vegetated buffers along streams, ditches, and lakeside property. If the property has been cleared, replant with native plants.

## Your Car

- Take your car to a commercial car wash that recycles the water and then sends it to the wastewater treatment plant.
- If you must wash your car at home, wash it with phosphorus-free products on a surface that soaks up the water and prevents run-off
- Reduce car trips in and out of the watershed by combining errands, carpooling, walking, using public transportation, or riding a bike.

## Waste

- Have your septic tank inspected and pumped every 3 to 5 years.
- Scoop the poop! Don't leave pet waste to decompose. Carry a bag or look for Mutt Mitt stations along trails. Bag your pet's waste and place it in the garbage.

## Soaps and Detergents

- When using soap or detergents outdoors make sure to use phosphorus-free products on a porous surface.



## CONTACT:

Whatcom County Stormwater Division 360-715-7450

City of Bellingham Environmental Resources 360-778-7900

Lake Whatcom Water and Sewer District 360-734-9224

<http://www.lakewhatcom.whatcomcounty.org>

**Puget Sound**   
**Starts Here**



# Focus

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## Nutrients in Our Lakes and Streams

### Issue

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Nutrients might be good for people, animals and plants but too much of them is not good for our water bodies. These nutrients also feed aquatic plants and algae and if there is an unusually high amount of nutrients the aquatic plants can become quite a nuisance.

### Background

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The nutrients in question are mainly phosphorus and nitrogen. Nitrogen and phosphorus are found in human and animal wastes, fertilizers and organic matter (such as leaves) that can wash into streams and lakes. Phosphorus can also be found in some soaps and detergents. Although nutrients can come from point sources of pollution, they are often associated with nonpoint sources of pollution.

**Point Source:** Point sources of pollution are those that come out the end of a pipe and have an easily identified source, such as a wastewater treatment plant or a factory. Because, the source is readily identified this type of pollution can be prevented or reduced by using various technologies and treatments.

**Nonpoint Source:** As opposed to point source pollution, nonpoint pollution comes from diverse sources that are not easily identified. A lot of this type of pollution occurs when rain and snow wash pollution off land surfaces into streams. This is called stormwater pollution. It can also come from activities on or near water. Nonpoint pollution can include runoff from lawns, croplands, forested land, livestock pastures and quarters; failing septic systems; and soil erosion.

Although nutrients can cause problems in any water body, they are of more concern in lakes and reservoirs than in streams because nutrients accumulate over time in these typically more still water bodies. Most streams flush nutrients downstream quickly so there is not a large quantity present at any given time. However, if the stream flows into a lake, the nutrients it carries can become a pollution problem.

### The Big Picture

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When nutrients accumulate in lakes and reservoirs the lake's natural aging process can be accelerated and more algae and aquatic plants can grow. These consequences can lead to changes in the water's pH, and less dissolved oxygen – important elements for healthy lakes and streams.

**Eutrophication:** All lakes age over time through a natural process known as *eutrophication*. As years pass more sediment is deposited in the lake bottom causing it to become shallower. Nutrients accumulate leading to increased plant and algae growth. There is also a progressive change in the water chemistry. The speed at which this process occurs is dependent on the average depth of the lake, the climate (especially rainfall and temperature), and the size and condition of the lake's drainage basin. In general, lakes that are deep, located in cooler climates or have an undeveloped drainage basin will age much more slowly than a lake that is shallow, located in a warm climate or surrounded by development.

Although it may take hundreds or thousands of years, a shallow lake can fill in with sediment, support extensive plant growth and eventually become a marsh or even dry land.

In highly developed drainage basins, *cultural* eutrophication occurs when people increase the amount of nutrients and sediment that enter a water body and speed up its natural aging process. Some of the ways people cause this is by discharging improperly treated sewage, applying excess fertilizers, not maintaining septic systems or using detergents containing phosphates.

**Nutrients and Plants:** Phosphorus and nitrogen act as fertilizers for algae and aquatic plants. When there is an excess amount of phosphorus and nitrogen these plants grow and reproduce at an abnormally fast rate. These plants become a problem when they interfere with the desired or accustomed uses of the water body. A lake with too much algae and plants can:

- be unpleasant to view.
- have odor problems when the plants die and decompose.
- interfere with recreational activities such as boating, fishing, water skiing and swimming
- reduce the numbers of large predator fish because the plants allow small fish more protection
- deplete the amount of oxygen that fish and other aquatic organisms need. Decomposition and respiration of these plants uses up oxygen. (See the Dissolved Oxygen and the Water Quality Standards Focus sheet, publication # 02-10-001, for more information on the importance of oxygen in water).
- change the pH (acidity or alkalinity) of the water which is important to the animals that live there. Photosynthesis can increase pH while respiration and decomposition can lower pH.

## **What You Can Do**

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Anyone who lives in a watershed – and that means all of us – may take certain actions to reduce polluted runoff from their property and therefore reduce the nutrients that reach our lakes and streams. Here are some things you can do:

- Cover and store manure, yard waste, fertilizers, and other chemicals away from the water.
- Maintain or enhance vegetation alongside water bodies, to filter pollutants from the run-off. Never remove the natural riparian (stream or lake side) vegetation.
- If you have large animals, keep them away from the lake or stream. Otherwise, the animals will trample the shorelines, destroy the riparian vegetation, and directly add nutrients to the stream.
- If you must clear or grade the land or build a road, be careful to prevent erosion and keep sediments (dirt with contaminants) out of the waterways.
- If you use a septic system, inspect it regularly to make sure its functioning properly.
- Use only phosphate-free soaps, detergents and cleaners in your home or business.
- Reduce your use of fertilizers and chemicals on your lawn and garden. Rain may carry these nutrients into the nearest water body.

For more information, please contact Ann Butler at (360) 407-6480 or via email at [anbu461@ecy.wa.gov](mailto:anbu461@ecy.wa.gov) The TTD number is (360) 407-6006