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County Planning Commission to Host Watershed Workshop
Ecology Explains Instream Flow Rule for Quilcene-Snow Basin

Port Townsend, WA – The Jefferson County Planning Commission will host a workshop on Wednesday, August 31 that connects current watershed planning efforts with the County’s land use planning program. The focus of the workshop will be on an instream flow rule proposed by the State Department of Ecology for the Quilcene-Snow Basin, also known as Water Resource Inventory Area (WRIA) 17. Ecology staff will make a presentation on the proposed rule, which would establish minimum flows for streams within WRIA 17, limiting future withdrawal from surface water or groundwater. Formal public hearings on the proposal are slated for October.

Staff from the Growth Management Services program of the State Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development will also participate. The workshop begins at 6:30 PM in the Tri-Area Community Center, 10 West Valley Road, in Chimacum. Planning Commission meetings include opportunities for public comment.

“By December, the Department of Ecology is scheduled to adopt new State rules that significantly alter future water use in Jefferson County,” said Jim Hagen, Chair of the Planning Commission. “Residents who may be unaware of these important water issues or are interested in how they will impact general land and private property use are invited to attend. Public input is a valuable part of our voice in government decisions.”

WRIA 17 is one of 62 designated watersheds in the state and stretches from Sequim Bay in Clallam County east through the Quimper Peninsula of Jefferson County and south into the Hood Canal area just past Quilcene. The State Watershed Planning Act set into motion a local planning process for WRIA 17. The goal was to create a decision-making tool for water resource management, including future appropriation of water associated with land use and development. The WRIA 17 Planning Unit completed and approved its Watershed Management Plan in October 2003. The Board of County Commissioners approved the Plan in January 2005.

One of the recommendations of the Plan was for the Planning Unit and Ecology to continue working collaboratively in an attempt to achieve consensus and approval of instream flow recommendations. It has been an ongoing and challenging effort to set flows at a level that is both protective of fish and adequate to provide water for future growth. Although recommendations from the Planning Unit have not been developed, Ecology is proceeding with a public review process and adoption of the instream flow rule as part of the Washington Administrative Code.

Instream flows based on habitat studies are currently being considered for seven of the sub-basins within WRIA 17. One issue in development of the proposed instream flow rule involves hydraulic continuity between groundwater and streams. Ecology is operating under the assumption there is 100 percent continuity between surface and groundwater, and a 50 percent return to groundwater where domestic on-site septic systems recharge the aquifer. This is a concept that is likely to be discussed at the Planning Commission workshop on August 31.

In addition to providing flows protective of fish, the proposed rule provides an allocation, or “reserve,” of groundwater, to meet future growth demands. Reserves are being suggested for all seven sub-basins. This reserve is formulated through accepting a one percent habitat loss (and the corresponding reserve amount) based on one percent of the low flow period. Groundwater withdrawn from the reserve will be “debited” against the account up to a maximum amount set aside.

“My principle concern,” said Bill Graham, Water Resource Manager for Public Utility District #1, “is that this reservation is untested in court and we appear to be the testing ground.”

Once adopted, the instream flow rule and associated reserve will have an effect on the County government and future county residents. Any new water rights issued by Ecology will be subject to the instream flows. The County will only be able to issue a building permit under RCW 19.27.097 if: (1) a landowner can be served by a public water utility with both legal and physical capacity to serve; or (2) in the case of a landowner who proposes use of an individual well, up to the maximum amount set aside in the reserve. According to the proposal, the reserve amounts would be reviewed every five years and could be adjusted over time through such actions as water rights purchasing.

For more information on WRIA 17, visit this webpage: <http://wria17.co.jefferson.wa.us/oview.htm>.

Ecology also has a webpage for the proposed instream flow rule: <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/instream-flows/quilsnowbasin.html>. Planning Commission agendas and minutes are located here: <http://www.co.jefferson.wa.us/commdevelopment/LRP.htm#PlanningCommission>.

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