

Sewage Spill Right to Know

SB 5450



Right now, the public cannot find information on sewage spills.

Hundreds of sewage overflows occur every year. Few are widely reported to the general public. Too often, the public only finds out about these spills when their local river, beach, or fishing area is closed because of contaminated water. Sewage discharges contribute to a range of human health and environmental harms including toxics exposure and bacterial pollution.

Wastewater treatment plant discharge permits require notification to the Department of Ecology. Final reports are included with permit documents in the complicated PARIS database that Ecology staff use for tracking permit compliance. Some spills are reported through the Emergency Response and Tracking System, which does not have a public-facing portal and includes information unrelated to sewage. Public records requests are required to obtain information on sewage spills.

People in Washington deserve to know when sewage spills impact their waters and neighborhoods. Prior to 2016, EPA required that Ecology compile and report sewage spills annually. However, in lieu of federal action, Washington can, and should, make this information available.

At least 10 other states such as South Carolina, Connecticut, and Massachusetts have a public disclosure hub and right-to-know law on the books, but Washington does not. This policy would require the Department of Ecology to establish a public-facing website with maps and searchable sewage spill records so the public can make informed and timely decisions about personal pollution exposure.



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