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Transmitted Via online comment form: :
<https://ecology.wa.gov/events/wq/puget-sound-nutrient-individual-permits/city-of-bellingham>

24 July 2026

RE: Draft Modification of the City of Bellingham Post Point Wastewater Treatment Plant NPDES Permit (No. WA0023744)

Dear Mr Matthews,

Thank you for taking the time to consider our comment on the Post Point Wastewater Treatment Plant permit that highlights the addition of nutrient reduction requirements. Outdated wastewater treatment plants are processing contaminated wastewater that they were never designed to handle and, therefore, contribute a considerable amount of pollution to our air, land, and water. State and Federal permits are the main mechanism, sometimes the only mechanism, to rein in the amount of contamination. It is important to make the permits as strong and protective as possible.

RE Sources, Mt Baker Group Sierra Club, and Whatcom Environmental Council are non-profit organizations located in northwest Washington. We work collectively to protect the land, water, and climate in our area that our communities depend on.

Nutrients are contributing to impairments in Bellingham Bay

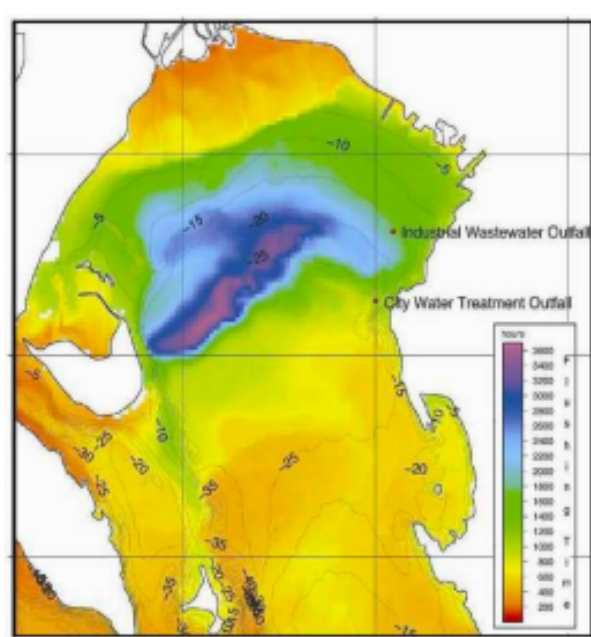
In 2018, the marine water quality in Bellingham Bay was evaluated using the Puget Sound Marine Water Condition Index. This index helps to highlight water quality issues and to monitor water quality conditions over time. There are 12 different water quality measurements used to calculate the index including temperature, dissolved oxygen, and nutrients. The score ranges from 0 to -50 (declining) and 0 to +50 (improving). In the most recent reporting, 2018, Bellingham Bay had a rating of -12 which is the worst of the 12 regions and an obvious decline (Table 1). *It is hypothesized that nutrients are the main cause of this decline* (Mohamedali et al. 2011 and Shull 2018).

Table 1: Marine Water Condition Index Scores for 12 Regions of Puget Sound from 1999 to 2018. Data source: Washington Department of Ecology, 2020.

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Score
Admiralty Reach	20	13	8	4	0	-5	-3	-5	4	0	-3	-2	14	12	8	4	-9	-1	1	3	25 to 28
Georgia Basin	-2	14	13	1	-2	10	-2	-7	1	9	-9	7	16	-7	3	-6	-4	-11	-6	-9	20 to 24
South Hood Canal	16	7	9	3	-4	-9	-1	-11	6	10	-1	-14	-11	1	4	4	-10	-1	4	1	16 to 19
Central Basin	15	14	12	8	-1	-6	-8	-3	4	1	-7	-10	7	0	1	-1	-5	-5	2	3	11 to 15
Bellingham Bay	10	13	23	-3	1	6	-12	-8	7	2	-12	-14	7	-9	0	-20	-3	-1	-8	-12	7 to 10
Sinclair Inlet	8	16	13	1	-3	-6	-5	-11	4	1	3	-13	3	-4	-3	-6	-8	-7	-18	-2	3 to 6
Oakland Bay	16	13	14	-4	-7	-9	-5	1	4	-3	1	-6	1	-3	1	-12	-9	-1	-2	3	-2 to 2
South Sound	19	14	14	-2	2	0	-4	-2	3	0	-8	-12	9	6	8	-2	-4	-1	8	-1	-3 to 1
Elliott Bay	28	19	5	-3	-9	3	-15	-9	3	4	-8	-5	5	5	8	-2	-7	0	7	-1	-7 to -4
Commencement Bay	17	8	13	-3	-5	0	-3	-1	7	-5	-8	-8	2	2	8	4	-6	-6	2	-7	-12 to -8
Whidbey Basin	11	8	8	-5	-2	-10	-1	1	9	7	-9	-14	-3	-3	-2	-6	-1	-14	-11	-4	-16 to -13
Budd Inlet	8	14	17	1	-13	-9	-7	-1	8	5	3	-8	-1	-6	0	-12	-6	-10	-2	-5	-20 to -17

There is a known hypoxic site in the north-central area of Bellingham Bay that gets to unhealthy levels nearly every summer-fall (Rubash and Kilanowski 2007 and Shull, D. 2018), and is severe enough that Outer Bellingham Bay is classified as impaired (category 5) for dissolved oxygen and temperature (Ecology - 303(d) list). The hypoxic area is not in the deepest region but is more aligned with where organic matter deposition, warmer water, and longer residence time (less flushing) occurs. The organic matter is most likely coming from the Post Point Wastewater Treatment plant, stormwater outfalls, and rivers and streams. Warmer water holds less oxygen than cold water and, therefore, as the water continues to warm there will likely be further declines in oxygen throughout the Bay.

Image 1: Hypoxic area in Bellingham Bay. Purple and blue areas have the lowest dissolved oxygen amounts. Source: Rubash and Lianouski 2007)



The anthropogenic sources of nitrogen to Bellingham Bay are mostly coming from the Post Point Wastewater Treatment Plant and the Nooksack River. Ferndale, Lynden, and Everson all discharge wastewater effluent into the Nooksack River and there is a significant amount of industrial agriculture in the watershed, such as large dairies and berry farms, that all contribute nutrients to the Bay. The concentration of nitrogen is higher in the effluent coming from Post Point than the Nooksack but the sheer quantity of water coming from the Nooksack makes the actual nitrogen amount or load very similar (Mohamedali et al. 2011). However, the nitrogen input from the Nooksack decreases significantly in the summer months because the flow is so much lower. Nitrogen from Post Point does not vary by season. *Because low dissolved oxygen conditions in Puget Sound are the worst in the late summer this means that the wastewater facility is having a more significant impact on the dissolved oxygen levels in the Bay than the Nooksack River.*

The data clearly shows that the current nutrient load into Bellingham Bay is causing impairments, and to rectify this we need a nutrient permit that decreases the nutrient load, not maintains it.

Nutrient regulations in this permit will not improve water quality in Bellingham Bay

The permit currently states that the City of Bellingham cannot exceed an annual TIN (Total Inorganic Nitrogen) load of 865,021 pounds in the discharge from Post Point WWTP. This number was calculated by finding an average of ammonia and nitrate-nitrite concentrations reported in previous permits from January 2020 through December 2024. The permit is requiring the WWTP to meet status quo conditions of TIN and not make any reductions, even when there is clear evidence that such reductions are possible and it is required by Federal and State law to do so.

Puget Soundkeeper (Soundkeeper) submitted a comment on June 25, 2026, that we agree with, that clearly and accurately explains the legal requirements. In sum:

- Washington State law mandates that discharges authorized by NPDES permits include and apply all known, available and reasonable methods of prevention, control and treatment (AKART) in wastewater permits;
- In no event shall the discharge of toxicants be allowed to violate Washington water quality standards; and
- Water quality-driven effluent limits are required in the permit, in addition to and/or more stringent than, AKART, as necessary to ensure the discharge authorized by the permit will not cause or contribute to a violation of water quality standards.

There is an abundance of research and examples to show that an AKART for nutrients of 3.0 mg/L nitrogen and 0.5 mg/L phosphorus is scientifically accurate and totally feasible. Soundkeeper highlights 45 facilities in the U.S., including one in Washington State, that are currently meeting and exceeding this AKART. This permit allows Bellingham to continue discharging nutrients to Bellingham Bay at an uncontrolled and excess rate that will

contribute to further decline of the Bay and violate Washington State water quality standards.

Wastewater from sewage solids treatment not accounted for

Currently, Post Point WWTP burns its sewage solids with two aging multi-hearth incinerators. In 2024, the clean air agency issued the Bellingham WWTP a Notice of Violation (NOV) for carbon monoxide, dioxins, and furans. In response to this NOV, the City has agreed to an emissions upgrade project to get these pollutants into regulation. This project will increase the temperature of the incinerators (using more fossil fuels) to more completely burn the sludge and will use wet scrubbers to remove the toxic contaminants. The concentrated contaminants found in the sludge such as dioxins/furans, PFAS, particulate matter, cadmium, lead, and mercury will be removed, but then they are delivered back into the headworks - where raw sewage is received. If the contaminants are dissolved or miniscule, they will likely be diverted to the liquid waste stream which does not treat or remove most of these contaminants. Therefore, toxics removed from the sewage solids could ultimately be discharged into the Bay.

Currently Post Point WWTP does not have a solid waste handling permit, although per WAC 173-350-021(d), material being received at a solid waste handling facility for recycling, incineration, disposal, or beneficial use meets the determination of solid waste. Without a solid waste handling permit, the waste coming from the incinerators at Post Point are not being adequately regulated.

It is unclear where this toxic stream is regulated; to our knowledge, the contaminants coming from the burning sludge have never been characterized and are not properly monitored nor regulated. The current permitting system allows for this transfer of toxic pollutants from one waste stream to another without any accountability. We ask that these contaminants be characterized, monitored, and regulated in this wastewater permit.

Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS) should be characterized for future regulation

In 2022, Federal legislation was passed requiring the testing and monitoring of sewage sludge and biosolids for PFAS. This will provide valuable information on types and amounts of PFAS in our sewage solids but does not provide hard data on the PFAS in our wastewater stream. This is especially important for WWTP's that incinerate their sludge, like Post Point. Once again, there is a major gap in the permitting of this facility because it is still incinerating its sewage sludge and does not have a solid waste handling permit and no regulation of the sludge except for air quality (a regulation it is violating).

PFAS testing, monitoring, and regulation is an evolving science but there is EPA approved methodology for testing PFAS in water (and soil) and there are State and Federal regulations to guide the usage of the methodology. Currently Ecology regulates PFAS for drinking water, groundwater, and surface water (CLARC tables) to protect humans and organisms from these harmful chemicals. At minimum, this permit should require PFAS

testing to better understand the amounts and types of PFAS that are being discharged into the Bay. This will provide essential baseline data that could be crucial as changes and upgrades to the facility are made in the upcoming years. For example, if the emissions upgrade project at Post Point unintentionally increases the amount of PFAS being discharged into Bellingham Bay, this baseline data could reflect that.

WWTP permits need to be comprehensive, collaborative, and incentivize sustainable technologies

Post Point, like many wastewater treatment plants in Washington, is nestled among highly used urban venues, and is adjacent to sensitive habitats. In Bellingham's case, Post Point is adjacent to a popular park, a neighborhood, a commercial district, a marine estuary, and a heron rookery. Our current wastewater treatment plant permitting system fails to protect people, wildlife, and the environment from toxic pollution and climate warming gases largely because the piecemeal approach to permitting fails to capture ALL pollution sources coming from this facility.

Currently, the incinerators at Post Point use huge amounts of methane to burn sewage sludge, over 1000 therms per day (or over 100 million BTUs), which generates the equivalent of over 10,000 pounds of carbon dioxide per day. To meet the emission requirements for the Clean Air Agency, the City will need to burn the incinerators hotter, which will require more fuel and result in increased greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. We understand that this permit does not cover emissions from the incinerators but the permit system is an accessory in contributing to the increased GHG emissions from this plant. The current permit system does not require, provide or consider a framework for wastewater treatment plants to install least impactful technologies.

Wastewater treatment permits are a guiding force for plant operators — they build and operate their plants to ensure they comply with the necessary permits and rarely do they go above and beyond basic permit requirements. Therefore, Ecology needs to ensure that these permits are strong and protective of people and the planet because, basically, this is the only tool we have to control pollution coming from WWTPs. Without stronger permits, Cities will continue to process sewage in a manner that pollutes.

Case in point: The City of Bellingham intends to operate their antiquated and polluting multihearth incinerators for 10 plus years because they have permission from the permitting agencies to do so even though there are less polluting alternatives available, that don't increase costs nearly as much. There is no incentive for wastewater treatment plants to move to more sustainable technologies because the permits do not require them to, nor do they provide a pathway for these upgrades to happen. This is a major flaw to how wastewater treatment plants are permitted in Washington state.

In sum, we are asking Ecology to:

- include AKART for nutrient discharges of no more than 3.0 mg/L for nitrogen and 0.5 mg/L for phosphorus;
- Characterize the contaminated water coming from sewage sludge incineration;
- Include PFAS testing in effluent for baseline data; and
- Coordinate permits so that all pollution is quantified at Post Point WWTP and strengthen permits so that the least impactful technologies are required or at least made possible.

Thank you for considering our comments.

Sincerely,

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