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In the Wake of Failed Toxics Legislation, Clean Water Groups Call on Governor Inslee to Protect People Who Eat Fish

OLYMPIA, WA—Earlier this year Governor Inslee pledged to approve the Washington Department of Ecology’s draft water quality rule only if the legislature passed a statewide toxics reduction program with the power to control pollution at the source. With the closure of the legislative session, Governor Inslee must decide whether break his pledge or direct Ecology to revise the draft rule, which sets water quality standards used to regulate toxic pollution in waterways, based on human health risks from the fish people eat.

Ecology’s draft water quality rule, issued in early 2015, was widely criticized by tribes, public health, and environmental groups as dangerously under-protective of human health. Case in point: the draft rule would increase the state’s cancer risk rate tenfold. According to a coalition of clean water and commercial fishing groups, the federal Clean Water Act compels the state to act in order to get into compliance with federal law and the failed legislation does not spell the end for meaningful changes in water quality standards.

“There is still time for Governor Inslee to be a champion for kids and families that rely on salmon and other fish,” stated Brett VandenHeuvel, Executive Director for Columbia Riverkeeper. “Failed toxic source control legislation only underscores the importance of using Ecology’s existing authority to keep dangerous toxic chemicals out of our food.”

In January, Governor Inslee backed Ecology’s draft water quality rule, which recognized higher fish consumption rates in the population, but significantly increased the state’s cancer risk rate and offered new loopholes for industry to avoid reducing toxics. Washington’s current water quality standard for toxics, previously set in 1974, assumed the average person ate less than a cracker-sized amount of fish, a paltry amount for most state residents, even more so for members of Indian tribes. While Ecology proposed increasing the fish consumption rate in the draft rule, the agency bent to industry pressure by adopting a less protective cancer risk rate and other loopholes.

Instead of improving regulatory standards to protect public health, Inslee promised meaningful reductions in toxics through an alternate approach: new source control legislation. Now that the proposed legislation failed, a coalition of clean water and commercial fishing groups is urging the Governor to ensure that Ecology revises its draft rule to maintain its previous cancer risk rate and eliminate loopholes. Ecology now has

until August 3, 2015, to adopt the draft rule or chart a new path.

“Governor Inslee must do everything in his power to protect the most vulnerable—babies and children—from the devastating health effects of potent neurotoxins like mercury and carcinogens like PCBs,” stated Chris Wilke, Executive Director for Puget Soundkeeper. “Ecology’s draft rule provides only the appearance of new protection while manipulating the math, leaving the actual water quality standards largely unchanged. This is simply unacceptable. Without the veil of a new source control package from the legislature, the Governor’s plan clearly has no clothes.”

“The greater purpose of legislation is to protect public health and safety, not simply maintain the status quo. If our elected officials don’t use this opportunity to improve standards for water quality, then what have we sent them to Olympia for?” stated Alex Corcoran, Publisher of Edible Seattle.

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Waterkeepers Washington is a statewide coalition of clean water groups committed to protecting and restoring Washington’s water resources. Members include Puget Soundkeeper, Columbia Riverkeeper, North Sound Baykeeper, and Spokane Riverkeeper. Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen’s Associations and the Institute for Fisheries Resources are also part of the coalition opposed to the inadequate rules.