

Outstanding Resource Water



Washington has an abundance of high quality water that is important to protect for uses such as habitat for threatened and endangered salmon, tribal customs, and recreation. The Clean Water Act provides an opportunity for states to identify their highest quality waters as outstanding resource waters and provide extra protection from future sources of degradation. People may nominate waterbodies for the state to designate for this highest level of protection. This is possible under the state's [antidegradation rules](#)¹.

How does Washington define an outstanding resource water?

The state specifically describes protection for outstanding resource waters in the antidegradation section of the water quality standards (WAC 173-201A-330). The rule contains specific eligibility requirements to identify the outstanding resources waters that receive special protection.

These would include, but are not limited to, waters without multiple sources of pollution that are located in areas such as:

- federal or state parks
- monuments
- preserves
- wilderness areas
- wild and scenic rivers

Outstanding Resource waters could also include waters of unique ecological or recreational value located in more urban areas. Once a water is designated as an outstanding resource water, it needs to be maintained and protected from all degradation.

Outstanding resource water eligibility

To be eligible for designation as outstanding resource water in Washington, the water must have one or more of the following criteria:

¹ <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/WAC/default.aspx?cite=173-201A-330>

- The water is in a relatively pristine condition or possesses exceptional water quality, and also occurs in federal and state parks, monuments, preserves, wildlife refuges, wilderness areas, marine sanctuaries, estuarine research reserves, or wild and scenic rivers.
- The waterbody must be largely free from human sources of degradation.
- The water has unique aquatic habitat types — such as peat bogs — that by conventional water quality parameters — like dissolved oxygen, temperature, or sediment — are not considered high quality, but are unique and regionally rare examples of their kind.
- The water has both high water quality and regionally unique recreational value.
- The water is of exceptional statewide ecological significance.
- The water has cold water thermal refuges critical to the long-term protection of aquatic species. For this type of outstanding resource water, the non-degradation protection would apply only to temperature and dissolved oxygen.

What happens after a waterbody is nominated?

Nominations must include sufficient information to show how the waterbody meets the eligibility criteria. If the nomination demonstrates that the waterbody meets the eligibility requirements, Ecology schedules a designation review. The review will include a public process and consultation with recognized tribes in the geographic vicinity of the water.

We have yet to hold a designation review so the exact process has not been determined. However, as stated in the rule, during the designation we will consider factors such as:

- The importance of the waterbody to the local or regional community.
- The difficulty of maintaining the current quality of the waterbody.
- The social or economic impacts to the local community.
- The level of support from the public.

After review of public comments, Ecology makes a final determination on whether a nominated waterbody should be adopted into the water quality standards as an outstanding resource water.

Related Information

- [Ecology's Antidegradation webpage²](#)



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² <https://ecology.wa.gov/OutstandingWater>