



Pollution Identification & Correction Program

2024 Annual Report

Skagit County's Pollution Identification and Correction (PIC) Program is a partnership between state and local agencies, tribes, local non-governmental organizations, shellfish growers, and private citizens. Skagit County is the lead agency for the program. We are dedicated to protecting the public from waterborne illness by reducing the levels of fecal bacteria in the rivers and creeks of Skagit County. The PIC Program has been operating since 2010 and has successfully reduced bacterial pollution in several watersheds in Skagit County.

Water quality monitoring and outreach to landowners are the core of our PIC Program. We identify water quality sampling sites near where streams meet and monitor the sites on a regular basis. When we find high levels of fecal bacteria, we perform source identification sampling (sometimes referred to as "bracket sampling") upstream to identify where the pollution is coming from. Staff then visit nearby property owners to identify the source of pollution and work with them to correct any problems that we find. Common sources of pollution include pets, failing septic systems, farm animals, and wildlife.

Through partnerships with the Skagit Conservation District, Skagit County Public Health Department, Craft3 Clean Water Loans, and Skagit Fisheries Enhancement

Group, we connect property owners to resources to find solutions to problems they may have. Resources include low-interest loans and grants for septic system repairs or replacements, free and confidential farm assessments with a trained farm planner, assistance with farm management, and financial assistance for fencing, invasive plant removal, native plantings, and other projects.

The major components of the PIC Program are presented in Table 1. The major components of Skagit County's PIC Program.



Figure 1. A PIC staff member counts colonies of *E. coli* bacteria in a water quality sample taken from the Samish watershed.

Table 1. The major components of Skagit County's PIC Program

SKAGIT COUNTY POLLUTION IDENTIFICATION AND CORRECTION PROGRAM						
Agriculture & Livestock	Septic Systems	Pet Waste	Water Quality Monitoring	Incentive Program	Executive Committee	Community Engagement
- Identify priority areas for focused PIC work - Partner with Skagit Conservation District, and Washington Departments of Agriculture and Ecology to implement voluntary compliance - Watershed surveys and property visits - Focused mailings and outreach to areas with poor water quality	- Septic 101 and 201 classes - Financial assistance for septic inspections for residents, including dedicated assistance for low-income residents - Financial assistance for septic system repair or replacement, including loans and grants - Inspection reminders and enforcement - Dye testing of suspect septic systems - Placement of portable toilets in key recreation areas	- Installation of pet waste bag stations and signage at public spaces in targeted areas - Mobile pet waste bag dispensers and outreach materials to key audiences such as people adopting pets from the Humane Society	- Ambient water quality monitoring to capture overall trends - Storm monitoring to capture runoff events - BEACH monitoring at Bay View State Park - Advanced source identification methods when available	- Dedicated funding available for water quality projects on private or public land through Natural Resources Stewardship Program, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Conservation District cost share - Projects such as exclusion fencing, heavy use areas, runoff control, manure BMPs, etc., which directly relate to bacterial pollution	- Quarterly update meetings to discuss progress and address roadblocks - Stakeholders include: Washington Departments of Health, Ecology, and Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Governor’s Office, Skagit Public Health, Skagit Public Works, Skagit Conservation District, Samish Indian Nation, Swinomish Indian Tribal Community, Puget Sound Partnership, EPA, Washington Conservation Commission, Shellfish industry representative	- Annual mailed newsletters - Attendance at community events - Presentations to community groups - Maintain online water quality map - Regular updates to social media, including production of video content - Media advertisements - Maintain close partnerships with related organizations that do environmental education

Areas of Focus

The Samish Bay watershed has been the major focus of the PIC Program since its inception (Figure 3. The Samish Bay watershed to the north, and the Padilla Bay watershed in darker blue to the south.). Samish Bay contains more than 4,000 acres of commercial shellfish beds. Shellfish are filter feeders and can accumulate fecal bacteria and other pollutants. High levels of these pollutants can make people who eat



Figure 2. The Samish Bay watershed to the north, and the Padilla Bay watershed in darker blue to the south.

the shellfish sick. The Samish Bay shellfish growing area closes for harvest several times each year due to high levels of fecal bacteria in the water during storms.

In the fall of 2009, the Washington State Department of Ecology (Ecology) completed a study on fecal coliform bacteria pollution in Samish Bay and created a plan for reducing the level of bacteria. The PIC Program has been working to implement that plan since 2010. The Samish River and its tributaries continue to be a major focus of the program.

In 2015, the program expanded to include the Padilla Bay watershed. This watershed includes 151 acres of commercial shellfish beds, along with a popular beach at Bay View State Park.

The PIC Program also responds to reports of pollution problems throughout Skagit County as time and resources allow.

Progress in 2024

Skagit County has partnered with the Washington Department of Health (DOH), Taylor Shellfish Farm, and Penn Cove Shellfish Farm to sample the waters of Samish Bay during shellfish harvesting closures. The goal of the sampling is to assess what portions of the shellfish growing areas are most impacted by fecal bacteria during storms. We succeeded in sampling the bay during eleven of the nineteen closures in 2024. Four of those sampling events qualify for use by DOH in evaluating whether any portion of the growing area can be safely upgraded.

Every summer for the last four years, our team of field staff from the various partner agencies create a plan for the upcoming rainy season. We select focus areas where we believe we can have the most impact and set goals for source identification work and outreach. We focused the majority of our source identification work on the Edison Slough, Friday Creek, Swede Creek, Colony Creek and middle/lower mainstem Samish River drainages. These areas continue to have water quality concerns. They also have

a greater density of livestock properties that appeared to be missing best management practices (BMPs) according to a 2021 livestock survey. In this survey, we evaluated BMPs visible from the right of way that help reduce manure related runoff like pasture rotation and the presence of heavy use areas in winter. An update to the livestock survey is scheduled for 2025.

Our multi-agency planning group chose to continue the previous year's goal of improving outreach to farmers. We sent letters quarterly to farms identified as having conditions that were high risk for pollution. The letters shared the farm practices that are crucial to protecting water quality, pastures, and soil, along with resources to help them improve the management of their property. These letters have resulted in connections with several farmers, including referrals to the Skagit Conservation District for assistance.

Figure 4 shows our source identification progress in 2024. Source identification sampling and windshield surveys identified seven properties with confirmed livestock-related pollution problems or conditions that are high risk for pollution during rain events. Problems included animals in saturated pastures, overgrazed and muddy pastures, or uncovered manure storage practices. We helped solve three livestock pollution problems and are working with three property owners to build manure storage facilities to help them better manage their manure. We also referred eight property owners to the Skagit Conservation District for assistance.

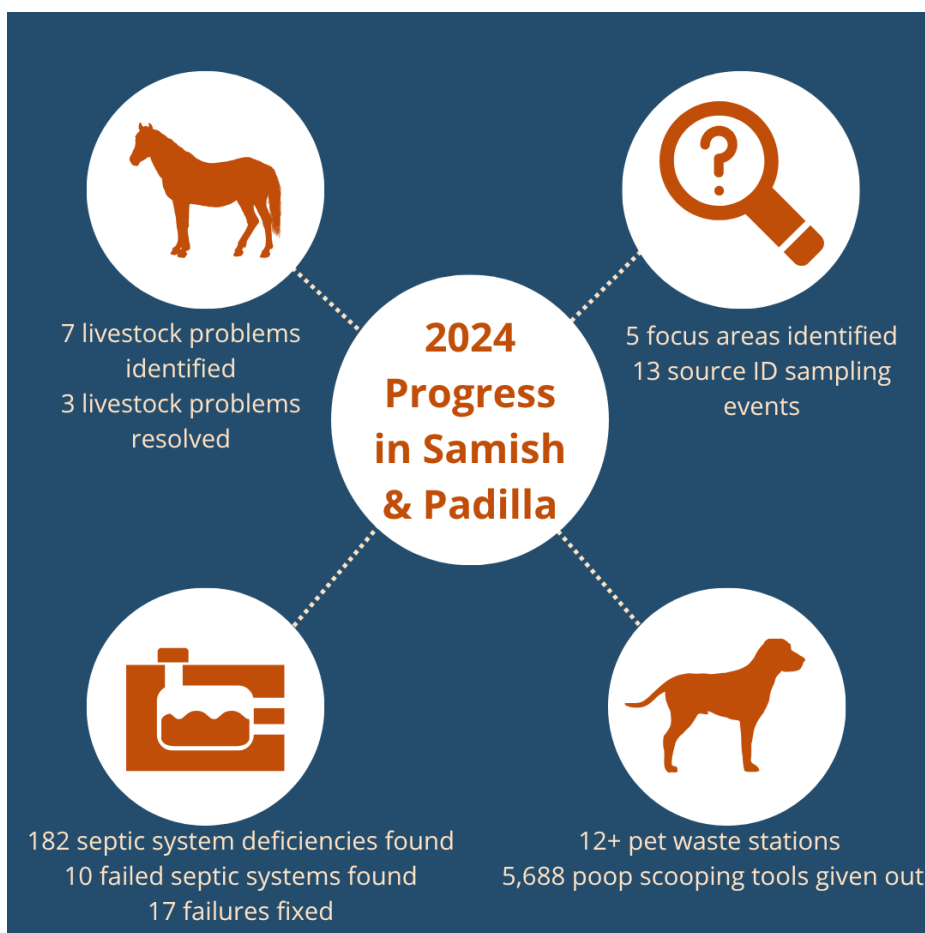


Figure 3. Overall progress by the PIC Program in the Samish and Padilla watershed focus areas.

The Onsite Septic Program continued county-wide notifications of septic maintenance reminders in 2024. The Program sent reminder letters along with information about our septic inspection rebate program to all septic system owners who were overdue for inspections. Thanks to a National Estuary Program grant, the Onsite Septic Program was able to give out a total of 735 rebates county-wide for inspection, pumping, installation of risers, or minor repairs. Rebates can be up to \$500 per property owner depending on the

service received. A financial assistance program was also available for property owners on limited, fixed incomes. Through that program, 101 vouchers were given out for a free septic system inspection county-wide, 32 were given out for pumping of the septic system, and 11 were given out for minor repairs.

County-wide, the Septic Program found 63 failed septic systems with surfacing sewage in 2024. An additional 629 septic systems had deficiencies that could lead to failure if not corrected. When the Septic Program finds a failing system, the County requires that the septic system be fixed. When the Septic Program finds a deficiency, the County notifies the property owners about it but does not require that they fix the problem. A breakdown of the location and number of deficiencies, failures, and fixed systems in the Samish and Padilla watersheds is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Onsite septic system failures and deficiencies found and fixed in the Samish and Padilla watersheds in 2024

Area of interest	Failures Found	Failures Fixed	Deficiencies Found
Samish Bay	1	3	59
Padilla Bay	9	14	123
TOTAL	10	17	182

Education & Outreach

Education and outreach are a major part of our PIC Program. Skagit County Clean Water staff create a monthly e-newsletter, send mailings, attend events, and manage Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and NextDoor social media accounts. Our goal is to update the public about our activities and inspire behavior change to benefit clean water.

We also work with other organizations such as Skagit Fisheries Enhancement Group, Skagit Conservation District, and Washington State University Extension to ensure that our messages are being shared by a variety of trusted information sources. Through a partnership with Whatcom Conservation District, state and local agencies can share their fecal coliform and *E. coli* water quality results on a single online map. Skagit County has been sharing water quality data on the map since 2017. The map helps us visualize the data and is an excellent public outreach tool. It can be found at <https://arcg.is/bzGi>.

Figures 5 and 6 show highlights of the traditional and social media outreach efforts for Skagit County's Clean Water Program in 2024.

Communications Review

2024 Skagit County Clean Water

OVERVIEW

2024 was a BIG year for tabling! Kicking off our joint pet waste campaign with Whatcom County brought us out to trailheads and pet stores for pop-ups, and we attended a range of events related to each facet of our mission. We continued our successful use of newsletters and social media to connect with a broad and varied audience. This year we also tapped into ads on local radio and Spotify.

TRADITIONAL PUBLIC OUTREACH ACTIVITIES

Events, presentations, newsletters, and ads.



EARNED MEDIA COVERAGE

Media news stories resulting from our work covered topics including our sampling program, the Farmland Legacy Program, Fidalgo Bay Day, restorations projects, and pet waste issues.



27

News stories in local print and online news sources

JOINT PET WASTE CAMPAIGN

We partnered with Whatcom County to deliver a campaign to encourage residents of both counties to scoop, bag, and throw away their dogs' poop when on trails and in their yards.

Our outreach for this campaign includes pop-up tabling at trailheads and pet stores, where we give away poop scooping tools and ask dog owners to pledge to scoop their dogs' poop. We've also formed partnerships with trusted dog health sources such as veterinarians, dog trainers, and the Humane Society of Skagit Valley. We provide our partners with poop scooping kits to give to their clients.

998 Poop scooping kits given to partners

8 Pop-ups

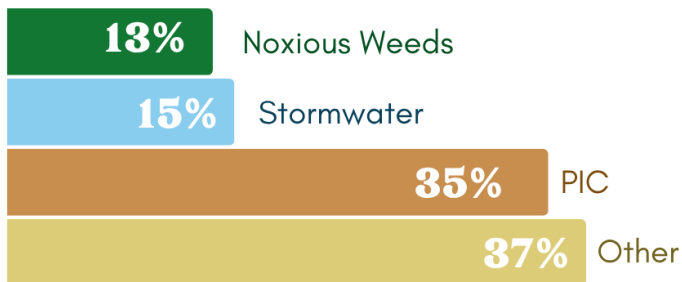
77 Pledge sign-ups

Figure 6. Traditional communications highlights in 2024.

Digital Media Review

2024 Skagit County Clean Water

 Facebook	1,696 Followers	145 Posts	24.3K Page reach 34.3% Reach growth	2,641 Post engagements- likes, comments, shares, link clicks
 Instagram	276 Followers	110 Posts	27.2K Page reach 466.6% Reach growth	1,170 Post engagements- likes, comments, shares
 Nextdoor	35,091 members, 24,133 households	26 Posts	125.7K Impressions	306 Post engagements- likes, comments, clicks
 YouTube	94 Followers	5 Posts	40.4K Views	Most popular video: Holiday Season Septic Care 16,673 views in 2024
 Advertising	3 Platforms: YouTube (via Google Ads), Instagram, Facebook	10 Ads	141.2K Combined reach	Ad subjects: Dog poop in yards, dog poop on trails, septic care



DIGITAL MEDIA CONTENT BREAKDOWN

We posted 278 times in 2024. Because of our diverse following across platforms, we cover a broad range of topics in our posts. While our main focuses were PIC, stormwater, and noxious weeds, we also created and shared content related to much, much more.

Figure 4. Website and social media communications highlights in 2024.

We attended eleven events this year. Events were a mix of larger events like the Festival of Family Farms and Fidalgo Bay Day, and smaller events with a focused audience like the Country Living Expo and pop-up events at local pet stores.

Our monthly e-newsletter audience continues to grow and has quickly become one of our most effective outlets for outreach. This year, our subscriber list grew 32% to 2,801 subscribers. The e-newsletter's open rate and link click rate regularly exceed government industry standards, indicating the content we share is valuable and relevant to subscribers. We also mailed newsletters to about 6,300 residents in the Samish and Padilla watersheds.

Throughout 2024, we collaborated with Whatcom County to launch a grant-funded campaign for pet waste on trails and in yards. The goal of the campaign is to use consistent messaging across both counties so that dog owners in northwest Washington get exposed to the same message in a variety of different ways. The campaign includes pop up events at trails and pet stores, signage at trailheads, a media campaign, and partnerships with trusted messengers such as veterinarians to share poop scooping kits and information. In total, we gave away 998 poop scooping kits and received 77 pledges from dog owners to scoop the poop. In addition, we continue to stock pet waste bags at ten pet waste stations around the Samish watershed.

We remain active on social media, posting on Facebook, Instagram, Nextdoor and YouTube. Nextdoor is our largest audience, while Facebook remains a good place to reach those who are already interested in natural resources topics.

Partner Outreach

Recognizing that County staff are not always the most trusted messenger for some property owners, the County partners with the Skagit Conservation District (SCD) to provide outreach and education to farmers. The County's Clean Water Fund provides a significant amount of funding to SCD to provide confidential technical assistance and farm planning. In 2024, SCD helped support farmers county-wide with more than two dozen farm plans. Technical assistance from farm planners is often the first step in engaging landowners to use best management practices to improve farm management and water quality.

Clean Water Funds also support SCD's educational efforts including e-newsletters sent to more than 1,200 recipients, classes on manure management, watershed health and backyard conservation, and hosting tables at more than a dozen events around the County. They also manage a robust set of Stream and Storm Team volunteers who monitor waterways in Skagit County.

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