

Changes in Decision Making in Diffuse Water Pollution Control

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The connection of fish depending upon water quality, which depends on habitat, which in turn depends upon land use, is accepted. This paper explores the land use to water quality part. Twenty years ago water quality was degraded largely by point sources of pollutants coming out of pipes. Regulations, discharge permits and technical improvements were the control mechanisms. The story of the Willamette River chronicles the improvement in dissolved oxygen and biotic habitat. Now the major pollutants come off the land, diffuse pollution by plant protection chemicals and over-enrichment by nutrients. Land management practices are not easily regulated by permits, for social and technical reasons. National standards appear not to be appropriate. Top-down education has been tried with limited success. Recognition that diffuse pollution is a "people" problem has led to control strategies that involve local citizens in "Watershed Councils" identifying their problems and developing their solutions for the watershed in which they live. Experience from sixty years of soil erosion control through local Soil and Water Conservation Districts indicates that these volunteer efforts can be successful if there is strong local leadership and if subsidies for changing land management practices are available. Many examples of local decision-making on resource issues are available nationally and internationally. The difficulties in improving water quality through the actions of these groups include limiting funding, lack of overall coordination of efforts, and the possibility that the difficult issues will not be faced by local groups with special interests.