

Storm and Surface Water Utility

Why We Need It

The City of Bellingham created the Storm and Surface Water Utility to comply with state and federal law, and to further protect our environment. A stormwater utility is very similar to drinking water, sewer, and other utilities. The utility charges a fee for services provided. In this case, the service is control of stormwater runoff through construction, operation, and maintenance of a stormwater system.



Clean, pristine water is a trademark of life in the Northwest. The growth of urban areas this past century has replaced native soils and vegetation with asphalt, concrete and other impervious surfaces. Native areas act as sponges for stormwater. Without this natural retention characteristic in the landscape, stormwater runs off impervious surfaces much faster, causing erosion, flooding, and poor habitat for aquatic life. Pollutants also enter public waters through stormwater.

Stormwater is considered the most significant source of water pollution in our country.

The purpose of the Storm and Surface Water Utility is to address these problems. Swales and various filtering systems help to clean the water before entering public waters. Detention facilities slow the rate at which stormwater is released back into public waters. Private facilities play a vital role in this process and need to be maintained to ensure our public waters are clean for all to enjoy.

Feel free to contact us if you have any further questions.

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Private Stormwater Facilities

Information - Maintenance - FAQ



The City of Bellingham drainage system is a network of open ditches, pipes, catch basins, retention ponds, and creeks—both publicly and privately owned—that control runoff from storms and other sources. Every storm drain and drainage system ultimately flows into a stream, lake, wetland, or the bay.

To assure that water quality is maintained, and as a part of federal and state compliance, the City of Bellingham inspects private stormwater facilities.

We look to see if the system is working in compliance with standards, and if not, what maintenance is needed.

This brochure contains information to help you understand what to expect and some background on stormwater maintenance.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is being inspected?

We are inspecting various parts of your stormwater drainage system. This could include swales, catch basins, oil-water separators, control structures, and the pipes connecting them together. Sites may also have ponds or underground detention vaults that will be inspected.

What are we looking for when we inspect stormwater facilities?

We are looking at how your system is working, and what maintenance is necessary to make it function properly. We ask that you have those portions of the system cleaned that are at or near capacity for infiltration, conveyance, or storage. Maintenance is usually not complicated. It may be a matter of unplugging portions of the pipe system, making sure that grass swales are properly vegetated, etc.

Do I need to be present for the inspection?

You do not need to be there for the inspection, but you are more than welcome to be present. If you would like to be there, give us a call at 778-7979 after you receive an inspection letter and we will schedule a convenient time.

Will I get a copy of the inspection report?

Yes, we will send you a copy of the inspection after the inspection is done. If no maintenance is needed, we will send you a letter stating the system is in compliance. If maintenance is needed we will send a letter detailing what needs to be done to pass next inspection.

How long do I have to complete the work?

The letter describing the maintenance that needs to be done will include a re-inspection date. You will have at least 30 days to complete the required work. If more time is needed, please let us know.



Who can do this type of work?

The maintenance can be done by you or your company. There are also a number of local contractors who are qualified to do this work.



Maintenance Issues for Stormwater Treatment Facilities

Routine maintenance is not happening on many facilities. Some of these facilities are not being maintained and stop working as intended. This could mean higher maintenance costs in the long run to bring facilities up to standards.

Treatment facilities treated as landscape features. Swales are sometimes incorporated into grassed areas. Short mowing heights, fertilizer and herbicides are often used. These lawn-maintenance practices defeat the original design of the swale to filter out pollutants.



Wet vaults are large underground storage tanks that use settling for pollutant removal. Periodic inspection of control structures is needed. Typical maintenance requires the use of a vactor truck.

Detention ponds can be effective treatment facilities, as well as a visual amenity. Ponds also use settling principles to remove pollutants. Sediment and metals accumulation may impair proper functioning of the facility. Maintenance schedules depend on the size of the pond. The surrounding landscape and outlet structure also require routine maintenance.