

Washington's Aquatic Lands



WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF
Natural Resources
Doug Sutherland · Commissioner of Public Lands

DNR's principal roles, responsibilities and concerns

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) manages 2.4 million acres of state-owned aquatic lands – tidelands, shorelands and beds of navigable fresh and salt waters. Washington received the aquatic lands at statehood, and DNR manages them as a public trust. The Legislature has recognized our state's aquatic lands as a "finite natural resource of great value and irreplaceable public heritage."

State-owned aquatic lands are managed for current and future citizens of the state:

- to sustain long-term ecosystem and economic viability; and
- to ensure long-term access to the aquatic lands and the benefits derived from them.

MANAGING THE STATE'S AQUATIC LANDS

The Legislature has directed the DNR to "... strive to provide a balance of public benefits for all citizens of the state." These benefits include (RCW 79.105.030):

- Encouraging direct public use and access;
- Fostering water-dependent uses;
- Ensuring environmental protection; and
- Utilizing renewable resources.

DNR may lease and generate revenue from aquatic lands in a manner consistent with these mandates.

The public benefits described in RCW 79.105.030 are the fundamental basis for decisions regarding state-owned aquatic lands. Each decision must be weighed with these benefits primarily in mind. While not every use of state-owned aquatic lands can always provide all of these benefits, all these benefits should be explicitly considered when deciding on a proposed use of these lands.

Public Use & Access

Public use and access to state-owned aquatic lands is to be encouraged and enhanced. DNR does this by providing opportunities to get to the water, including access to public shellfishing sites, grant funding, and rent incentives, among others.

Water-dependent Uses

A water dependent use is defined as a use which cannot logically exist anywhere but on the water and DNR is directed to preserve and enhance these uses. DNR can also support local economies by providing opportunities for water-dependent businesses.

Environmental Protection

Protecting and restoring the environment by such activities as carrying out nearshore research, removal of derelict vessels and fishing gear, conditioning leases with Best Management Practices, and establishing and maintaining aquatic reserves, among others.

Renewable Resources

Effective utilization of renewable resources, including promoting sustainable uses, providing recreational and commercial shellfish harvesting opportunities, and management of dredged material.

COMPLEX MANAGEMENT ISSUES

The waters and shorelines of Washington are areas of increasing concern. As the state population increases, so do the pressures on Washington's aquatic lands – for commerce, recreation, seafood harvest, industrial development, transportation, and habitat.

The Department manages state-owned aquatic lands for all citizens of the state with each citizen having an equal and undivided interest in the lands. We must therefore manage these lands not only for those who wish to use them for individual benefit, but also for the general public so that all the citizens of the state may derive a direct benefit. This makes management of state-owned aquatic lands very complex. In effect, DNR is charged with balancing individual benefit with the general public benefit.

DNR is constantly working with various local, state, and federal agencies to find solutions to problems that Washington's aquatic lands face. The challenge for DNR, as manager of state-owned aquatic lands, is to balance the demands on the state's aquatic resources so that the lands and the benefits they offer are available for this generation and for the generations to come.

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