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Ecology may ban new wells in part of Skagit

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New wells may be prohibited in a 27-square-mile area of Skagit and Snohomish counties next year due to Department of Ecology limitations on water use.

This would be the first such well restriction in the Skagit watershed following a 2006 rule establishing limits on wells in 25 stream basins.

The Carpenter and Fisher Creek basins, extending from the north end of Snohomish County up to the south end of Mount Vernon, were limited by the 2006 rule to just 66 new wells.

According to Ecology, the basins are close to reaching their limit and could be closed to all new wells. Officials suspect only a handful of new wells would be allowed in those basins.

The possible closure surprised and concerned officials in Skagit County's Public Works Department, which may soon be in the position of denying permits for new wells, slowing if not completely blocking some new construction in that portion of the county.

"It definitely is concerning," said Gary Stoyka, water resource project manager for Public Works. "The outlook is unclear as to what all this will mean."

The only developments that would be allowed would be ones that could hook into the Skagit County Public Utility District or find ways to offset their water use.

Andy Dunn, section manager for Ecology's water resources program, said he was alarmed to be considering closing the area so soon after the 2006 decision.

"We all knew there would be a point of exhaustion," Dunn said. "The surprise here is that it occurred two or three years earlier than we projected."

Before the closure is formalized, Stoyka and Snohomish County Planning and Development Services will determine just how many new wells were drilled and how many mitigation projects were put in the area to offset the number of wells.

But that accounting will not likely change Ecology's plans to stop new well drilling. Dunn said the area is extremely close to tapping out its allowed water use.

"We were concerned that if it's not here already, it's pretty darn close," Dunn said.

Dunn said he was glad to know there were no well permits in process for the area.

But Stoyka said that is likely due to low construction from the economy. He said the area was popular for new development before the housing market crashed.

While Ecology prepares to close the area to new wells, the Swinomish Tribe is fighting for stricter water-use rules.

“Water management in the Skagit is very critical,” Swinomish Chairman Brian Cladoosby said. “And we feel that Ecology has not done the best job in managing a resource that is so important for salmon.”

The Swinomish were not part of the 2006 water rule agreed upon by Skagit County and Ecology.

Cladoosby said the tribe wants to go back to more restrictive water-use rules established in 2001, which would allow Ecology to ask new developments to turn off their water if tributary flows are low.

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