



State of Oregon  
Department of  
Environmental  
Quality

# **Progress Report on Process Improvements in the Wastewater Management Program December 2002**



## INTRODUCTION

The 71<sup>st</sup> Oregon Legislative Assembly included the following note in DEQ's 2001-2003 budget for the Water Quality Program:

The Department is directed to advise the Emergency Board during the interim on any progress made toward backlog reduction and reducing new application processing time resulting from process improvements as described in the Wastewater Permitting Improvement Team final report, including implementation of the watershed based management plan, improving data quality and systems, and streamlining the permitting process.

This report summarizes work that has occurred in these areas during the biennium.

## BACKGROUND

DEQ's Wastewater Management Program is responsible for permitting the discharges of wastewater and storm water from over 4000 different sources to Oregon's water and land. As required by the Federal Clean Water Act, wastewater discharges are expected to be treated or controlled to insure that Oregon's ocean, rivers and ground water meet established water quality standards. This work involves issuing permits, inspecting sources and following up on compliance problems.

New applications for wastewater permits are given highest priority in the Wastewater Management Program. Wastewater permits are generally required to be renewed every five years to assure water quality continues to be adequately protected. Dischargers that want to change the amount or content of their waste stream must apply for a permit modification.

As shown in the table below, the total number of permits managed by the program has increased from year to year, but the staffing level for this program has not kept pace.

	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002
# of Permits*	2703	3205	3500	3884	4019
# of FTE (Authorized in LAB)	49	60	56	56	56
# of Permits per FTE	55	53.4	62.5	69.4	71.8

\*Includes individual permits and general permits. Individual permits account for roughly 35% of total.

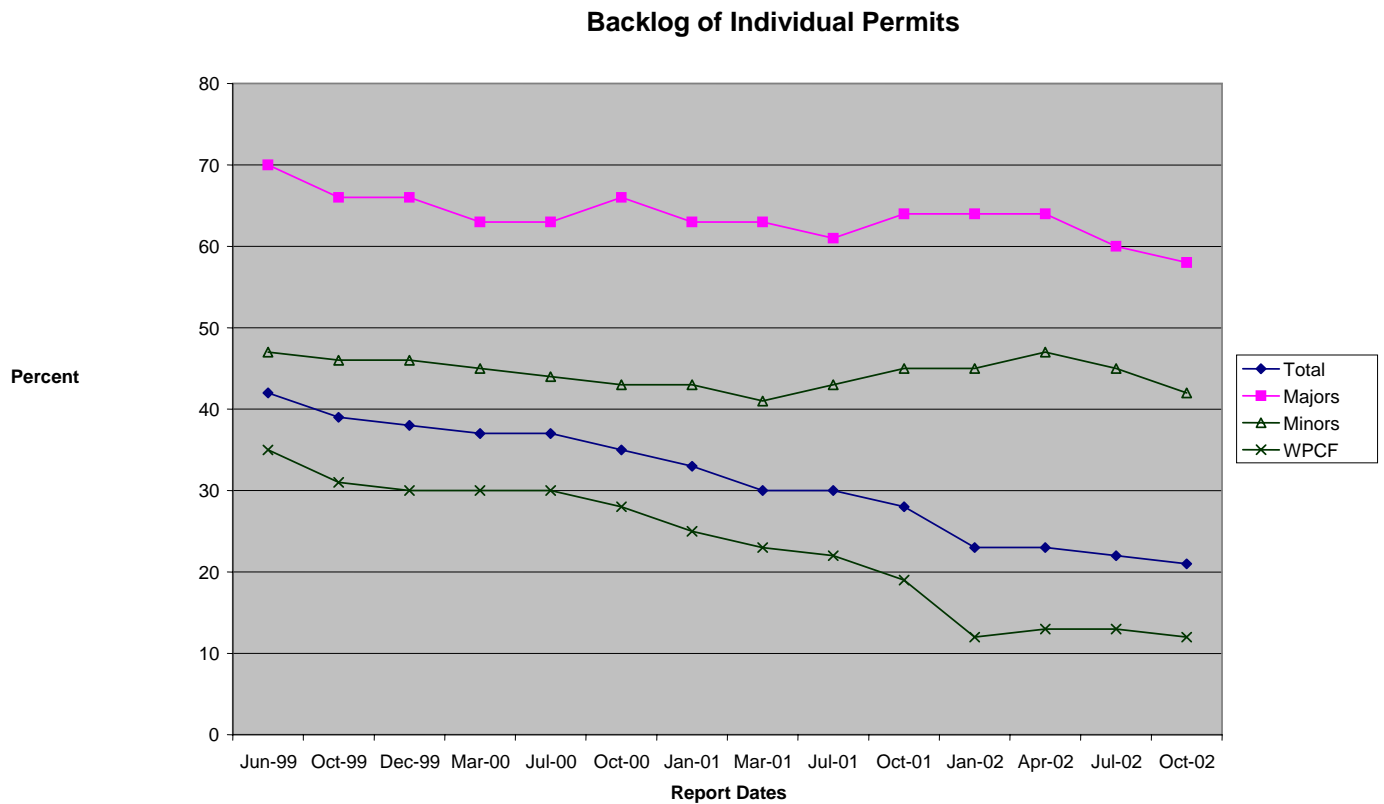
A recent workload analysis indicates that the program is understaffed by 12 FTE relative to the level needed for the number of permits managed by the program. As a result, there is a sizable backlog of permits awaiting renewal and technical assistance and compliance activities have diminished.

## REDUCING THE BACKLOG OF EXPIRED PERMITS

Approximately one third of the wastewater permits managed by DEQ are “individual” permits and the others are “general” permits. General permits are developed for groups of facilities or other sources that have similar wastestreams. Applying for or renewing a general permit can be accomplished quickly because the permit requirements have already been determined.

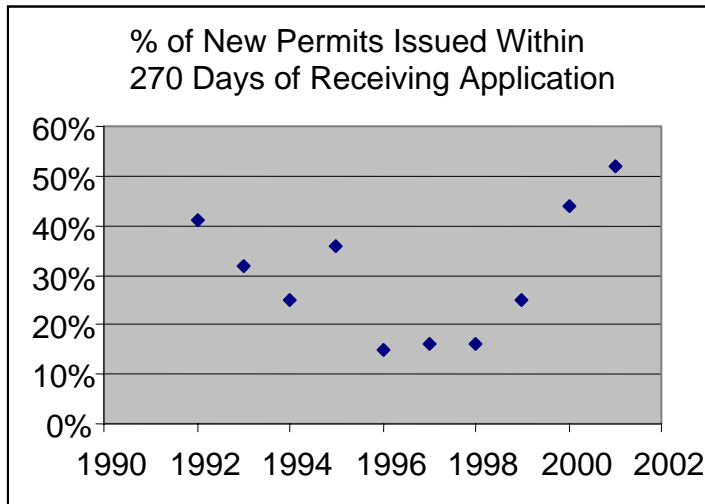
Individual permits require much more effort because each permit is unique and generally involves complex water quality issues. These permits are required to be renewed every five years to insure they contain the most updated provisions, and the workload associated with this requirement has been one that DEQ has been unable to keep up with. As a result, there is a backlog of expired individual permits. Facilities with expired permits are allowed to continue to operate under the original permit conditions until the permit can be renewed, however this comes with certain costs. Expired permits may lack updated provisions, resulting in unwarranted environmental impacts. This situation also leaves permittees vulnerable to third-party lawsuits and can result in an “uneven playing field” among permitted facilities.

As demonstrated in the figure below, the backlog of individual wastewater permits has shown modest reductions over the past few years. DEQ is not able to attribute the reductions to specific actions because of a variety of factors at play.



## PROCESSING TIME FOR NEW PERMITS

DEQ, in conjunction with the Oregon Progress Board, has tracked DEQ's handling of new permit applications for 10 years. The measure that has been used is the percentage of new individual permits issued within 270 days of receiving an application. As depicted in the graph below, there has been a marked improvement in this area in the past two years.



## STREAMLINING THE PERMITTING PROCESS

DEQ convened an internal Wastewater Permitting Improvement Team (WPIT) in May, 2000 to review the permit writing process and make process improvement recommendations. The WPIT report was completed in June 2001. Nineteen specific recommendations, both short- and long-term, were included in the report. To date, DEQ has completed 5 of the recommendations, 5 others are in progress and partially completed, and 9 have been postponed because the workload cannot be managed given the current staffing level. The full WPIT report is available on the DEQ web site at: <http://www.deq.state.or.us/wq/wqpermit/WPITFinalReport.pdf>. A status report describing these efforts is attached.

## WATERSHED SCHEDULE FOR PERMIT ISSUANCE

In February 2000, DEQ began to transition its permit issuance schedule to a watershed approach. The watershed approach is expected to increase efficiency by making it easier and less time consuming to coordinate common permitting activities, such as monitoring and inspections, within a geographic area. Watershed scheduling also links the permit issuance work to major watershed restoration efforts going on in the rest of the Water Quality program and at other State and Federal agencies. In addition, the permit issuance schedule communicates DEQ's plans to backlogged permit holders so they can more accurately anticipate pending changes to their operations.

The transition to the watershed schedule is expected to take at least five years due to the five-year cycle for renewing wastewater permits. We do not expect to begin to see measurable

efficiencies resulting from the new approach until it has been more fully implemented. In addition, we are encountering some difficulty in making a complete transition because the priority placed upon issuing new permits restricts our ability to focus staffing resources to specific watersheds.

## **DATA MANAGEMENT IMPROVEMENTS**

DEQ has completed two major data management projects:

1. The database used to track and manage permit information has been replaced with a new database that will allow much simpler and more sophisticated tracking of permit application and development status. The new database was initiated in October 2002.
2. DEQ has developed and implemented a time accounting system (Q-Time). This system was launched in July 2001 and will allow reporting and analysis of staff effort that was not previously available.

These two systems will allow for more precise workload management and improved reporting on results.

## **NEXT STEPS**

DEQ has formed an advisory committee to comprehensively review its Wastewater Management Program and evaluate performance expectations, process efficiencies, regulatory requirements and funding levels. The committee will develop recommendations for program changes and improvements as well as funding. The first meeting of the committee was held in December 2002 and the final report is planned for early 2004 in order to develop proposals, if needed, for the 2005 legislative session.

Additionally, EPA has indicated that it will begin a review of the permitting program in order to evaluate the adequacy of DEQ compliance with the Federal requirements. The review is expected to begin in February 2003 and conclude later in the year.

## **CONCLUSION**

DEQ is continually working to improve the efficiency of its Wastewater Management Program. As reported above, these efforts are beginning to show measurable results. Additional improvements are expected when permit issuance improvement efforts are more fully implemented and the transition to the watershed approach has been completed. In addition, the comprehensive review of the program by the newly formed advisory committee is expected to recommend additional ways to further improve the program and ensure its long term effectiveness and funding stability.

## Wastewater Permitting Process Improvements Status Report December 2002

DEQ's Wastewater Permitting Improvement Team (WPIT) completed a review of the permit writing process and presented process improvement recommendations in a report dated June 2001. This report is based on the Recommended Implementation Plan found in Table 2 of the WPIT Final Report and summarizes the implementation status of each recommendation. The full report and the initial implementation plan are available on the DEQ web site at:  
<http://www.deq.state.or.us/wq/wqpermit/wqpermit.htm>

RECOMMENDATION	Original Completion Target	STATUS
1. Create and maintain a Master List of existing policies, guidance and tools for writing and processing a permit.	09/01	Completed: "Permit Corner" established on internal and external Web Page; includes Master List of Guidance and extensive references, links to permit application/writing information, etc.
2. Create and prioritize a list of new and existing policies, guidance, tools and rules that need to be developed or updated for specific situations.	09/01	Partially Completed: List created; guidance development proceeds on a case-by-case basis based on need and available resources.
3. Create an internal permit writing checklist for permit writers to ensure completeness and consistency.	08/01	Partially Completed: Checklist drafted; permit "wizards" (i.e., electronic permit templates) have been developed for various types of permits to promote use of consistent language.
4. Update and communicate the Headquarters / Regions Agreements describing roles/responsibilities for the wastewater management program.	10/01	Postponed
5. Define the administrative and technical duties of permit coordinators and permit writers by updating the written permit processing procedures.	To Be Determined	Postponed: Current guidance dated May 2000
6. Modify permit writers' meetings to be participatory, interactive, useful and mandatory.	12/01	Completed: Revamped meetings started October 2001
7. Support the integration or formation of internal watershed work groups to address planning and coordination issues between TMDL staff, permit writers and the laboratory.	06/02	Postponed
8. Develop a data request strategy for obtaining needed data to write a permit based on the watershed approach.	03/02	Postponed

RECOMMENDATION	Original Completion Target	STATUS
9. Develop data systems to ensure that data are accessible to permit writers.	Ongoing	Partially Completed: Development of electronic monitoring database to be completed June 2003; links to laboratory and enforcement databases added to website.
10. Update the Permit Writer's Manual so that it is electronic, accessible, easily maintained and updated, and provides all the necessary information to write a permit.	09/03	Postponed
11. Develop standardized language for similar situations and circulate to permit writers.	9/02	Partially Completed: Permit "wizards" that provide standardized language have been developed for various types of permits and inspection reports.
12. Develop a mentoring program (lead worker) to support on the job training and identify subject-area specialists.	03/03	Postponed
13. Designate a training coordinator responsible for developing a training program.	6/02	Postponed
14. Develop a formal decision making policy consistent with the priorities of the water quality program.	01/02	Completed: Adopted as an element of the "Charter" for the Water Quality Program Management Team (Feb 2002).
15. Develop an annual Operation Plan for the water quality program that serves to define program priorities and outputs based on the Strategic Plan.	05/02	Completed: Water Quality operating plan issued March 2002.
16. Implement the existing work plan and the performance appraisal processes.	03/03	Partially Completed: Senior Management emphasizing timeliness, measuring compliance with annual appraisals; agency wide review of performance appraisal process in progress.
17. Managers should delegate more tasks and focus on management functions.	03/03	No specific actions taken; many other recommendations inherently address this issue; Director's focus on Excellence in Management is also related.
18. Involve permit writing staff in the process of rule/standards development to address the affects that any changes may have on the permit writing process and implementation.	12/01	Completed: The Revised Agency Rulemaking Procedures prompts involvement of those affected by rules undergoing development.
19. Review existing regional databases that track enforcement and compliance actions.	12/01	Postponed: Pursue as enhancement to new permits database.