

Notification of Environmental Justice Assessment on the Safe Drinking Water Initiative

May 5, 2025

WHAT

The Washington State Department of Health (DOH) is conducting an Environmental Justice Assessment on the Safe Drinking Water Initiative. The Washington State Legislature provided funding in the 2023-2025 biennium to extend outreach and provide education and groundwater testing for nitrate in the Lower Yakima Valley Ground Water Management Area (LYV-GWMA) in Yakima County.

The Safe Drinking Water Initiative is a collaboration among DOH, Yakima County Public Services (YCPS) and the Yakima Health District (YHD). It can provide free water testing for nitrate to protect community members who rely on private and shared wells. If there are nitrate levels greater than 10 mg/L (the Maximum Contaminant Level for nitrate) in the water, drinking or consuming it is considered unsafe, and people should drink bottled water and use it to make formula, wash and cook food, and brush teeth.

The Safe Drinking Water Initiative can also provide bottled water and specific water filters to residents whose water tests exceed nitrate greater than 10 mg/L. Additional funding is requested in 2025-2027 to sustain efforts and grow support into Benton County.

The purpose of an environmental justice assessment is to identify:

- Who might be most impacted by an agency's action
- Environmental benefits, harms, and health impacts of the action
- Ways to minimize or eliminate negative environmental impacts
- How to equitably distribute positive environmental impacts.

Visit our [Environmental Justice webpage](#) to learn more about Environmental Justice Assessments.

WHY

Nitrate is a chemical found in most fertilizers, manure, and liquid waste discharged from septic tanks. Rain or irrigation water can carry nitrate down through the soil into groundwater. Once there, nitrate can flow into the water of private and shared wells. Drinking or consuming water with a high level of nitrate contamination can affect how blood carries oxygen. Infants are particularly at high risk of developing a serious health condition called **blue baby syndrome**. Nitrate can also be especially harmful for pregnant women.¹ It can also impact people who are immunocompromised or have weak stomach acids.

Many groundwater wells in the LYVGMA contain nitrate. To better protect public health, in 2023 the Safe Drinking Water Initiative began to reach out to residents on private and shared wells in LYV area to inform them about their well water and provide alternative options for drinking water. Through this program DOH is providing residents with education on nitrates and how to properly maintain their wells. DOH is also providing interim bottled water and reverse osmosis systems at no cost to owners. This work is currently being done in partnership with YCPS and YHD for consistency with their ongoing work.

¹ [Nitrate in Drinking Water | Washington State Department of Health https://doh.wa.gov/community-and-environment/drinking-water/contaminants/nitrate](https://doh.wa.gov/community-and-environment/drinking-water/contaminants/nitrate). Accessed 5/1/2025

WHO

Our program aims to engage with residents living in the LYV and the western part of Benton County who are on ***private or shared wells that are impacted by high levels of nitrate*** in the groundwater.

If you identify as a member of one or more of these groups and would like to share your thoughts or connect with one of our staff for support, please contact us at anchee.nitschkedurben@doh.wa.gov or see ways to get involved below.

WHEN

See below for the proposed Safe Water Program Initiative timeline and how the environmental justice assessment process fits into it. Areas in grey highlight opportunities for the public to engage.

Date	Milestone
2019-Present	Implementation of the Groundwater Area Management Plan
July 1, 2023	Safe Drinking Water Initiative announced through June 30, 2025
Spring 2025	EJA begins / Publish Notification
Spring and Summer 2025	Ongoing outreach to Tribal government, community members in the Lower Yakima Valley, and engagement planning for western Benton County
July 1, 2025	Potential announcement of funding for 2025-2027 biennium and expansion into Benton County—dependent on the Governor's final 2025-2027 budget
Fall 2025	Finalize EJA reporting

The timelines and milestones in this table may change. To stay current, please use the email contact information provided below to connect with staff.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

For questions about this environmental justice assessment and current and future opportunities for engagement, please contact Anchee Nitschke Durben at anchee.nitschkedurben@doh.wa.gov.



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