



# 2019 Stormwater Utility Rate Increase FAQ's

Public Services – Water Resources ◆ 128 N. 2nd Street 4th Floor Courthouse - Yakima, Washington 98901 ◆ Phone (509) 574-2300

## **Yakima County is proposing an increase to the stormwater management utility base rate for Fiscal Year 2020 and beyond.**

The current base rate is \$29.50 per year per Equivalent Residential Unit (ERU) for parcels located within the stormwater utility. Yakima County is proposing a base rate increase of \$10.50 to cover the increased cost to meet the requirements of the current National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Eastern Washington Phase II Municipal Stormwater Permit.

### **The new stormwater management utility base rate for 2020 and beyond will be \$40.00 /year/ERU.**

Yakima County has developed this document to answer some frequently asked questions.

- **What is the stormwater utility?**

A stormwater utility generates revenue by charging users, property owners, a fee based on the expected amount of stormwater runoff from the property. These fees are then used to implement stormwater management programs in a given jurisdiction.

Yakima County's stormwater utility was created in 2008. The utility assesses an annual user fee to approximately 10,500 parcels within the service area and generates an operating budget of approximately \$500,000 in order to fund stormwater management activities required by the Eastern Washington Phase II Municipal Stormwater permit. The proposed rate increase will provide additional annual revenue of approximately \$200,000 to the stormwater management program for a total operating stormwater budget of approximately \$700,000.

- **Why does Yakima County need a stormwater utility?**

The United States EPA issued new stormwater regulations in 1999 that require communities the size of Yakima, Union Gap, Selah, Sunnyside, and urban Yakima County to control water pollution from stormwater runoff. These communities are required to implement stormwater management programs that will reduce stormwater pollution discharges. Washington State Department of Ecology, that administers the NPDES program in Washington, issued the Eastern Washington Phase II Municipal Stormwater Permit on February 16,



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2007 and reissues the permit every five years. The permit requires communities that meet certain criteria to perform six control measures, comply with any TMDL processes and monitor the effectiveness of their program.

- **How are stormwater utility service areas determined? Where is Yakima County's stormwater utility area?**

Utility service areas are determined by each jurisdiction. Service areas are based on the area of coverage defined in the Eastern Washington Phase II Municipal Stormwater permit, which is determined from population density gathered by the U.S. Census Bureau. Permit areas are either the incorporated area of a permitted city or the urbanized areas and urban growth areas surrounding permitted cities. Most jurisdictions set utility service area boundaries based on this definition. Yakima County's stormwater utility service area is the Urban Growth Area surrounding the cities of Yakima, Selah, Union Gap, and Sunnyside.

- **What is the stormwater utility fee used for?**

Stormwater utilities in each community provide revenue to pay for operation and maintenance of stormwater infrastructure and permit compliance for stormwater discharges. Yakima County's stormwater utility pays for a wide variety of services and activities. The following is a list of some of the primary services and activities:

- Inspection of construction sites for erosion and sediment control
- Inspection of private stormwater facilities for operation and maintenance
- Review of development plans for surface water management
- Response to citizen inquiries, violation reports, and complaints
- Detection and elimination of prohibited discharges to the storm sewer system
- Storm sewer system mapping
- Public drainage and storm sewer maintenance, repair, and improvement
- Water quality improvement activities (regulatory and local needs based)
- Water quality improvement projects
  - Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs)
  - Stormwater Facility Retrofits
- Public outreach and education activities
- Recordkeeping and report preparation



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- **How is the stormwater utility fee calculated?**

Stormwater fees are assessed based on the land use and amount of impervious surface on each parcel. Each property is assessed the stormwater fee based on the number of Equivalent Residential Units (ERUs), or amount of impervious surface, on the parcel. One ERU is defined as the average amount of impervious surface for a single-family residential home, approximately 3,600 square feet. Every year, the process begins by classifying parcels in the utility into one of the following categories, based on land use:

- Residential
- Commercial/Industrial (includes government, military, schools, churches, apartments, mobile home parks, etc.)
- Agricultural
- Exempt

After each parcel is classified, Yakima County uses GIS to determine the amount of impervious surface, the number of ERU, on each parcel in the utility. Residential parcels are charged the base rate, one ERU. Commercial and industrial parcels are charged the base rate multiplied by the number of ERU on the parcel. Agricultural parcels within the utility are charged based on parcel size.

- **Why am I being charged a stormwater utility fee?**

Almost every property discharges some stormwater into the public drainage systems, even if it is not noticeable to you. Many properties generally discharge runoff during snow melt when ground conditions are frozen. If absolutely no stormwater drains from your property, even during severe storms or periods of frozen ground, you may still be served by the existence of a stormwater management program.

Public properties also discharge to the public drainage system, thus stormwater from the roads you drive on, parks you recreate in, and emergency service facilities you rely on contribute to stormwater pollution. Keep in mind that a lot of stormwater does run off from other properties. Properly controlling that stormwater runoff is a very real service to you and other property owners.

Stormwater is not treated and the pollutants in stormwater go to area creeks, streams, and lakes and affect the health of people, fish, wildlife and other natural resources that depend on those habitats. That same water



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is pumped for irrigation on crops and for use in drinking water. Stormwater quality affects everyone, even though the sources are generally a result of urbanization.

- **Isn't this just another tax?**

No. The stormwater utility fee is a user fee. Although the fee is a cost to property owners, it is not a tax on the value of the property – it is assessed depending on the amount of impervious surface which is related to the amount of stormwater runoff. This is similar to fees collected to handle and manage solid waste.

- **When does the rate increase become effective?**

The rate increase, if adopted by the Board of County Commissioners, will become effective January 1, 2020.

- **Why is Yakima County increasing the rate now?**

This fee has not increased since the creation of the utility in 2009. The current base rate of \$29.50/ERU is unsustainable. As of 2018, the stormwater program has begun funding from the stormwater reserve fund. Without the rate increase, the stormwater program will continue to deplete reserves and may completely exhaust them in as little as 5 years.

Over the past 10 years, more stringent permit requirements and inflation means the revenue provided by the 2009 base rate no longer covers the expenses of managing the stormwater program in full. The fee increase will allow the county to continue to meet the increased requirements of the current stormwater permit, to prepare for future requirements related to TMDLs, and to develop projects to protect and improve water quality in the Yakima basin.

- **Why does this rate increase seem so large?**

Yakima County has strived to keep the stormwater utility fee as low as possible for the life of the stormwater management program. When the utility was created, the base rate of \$29.50 provided enough revenue to manage the existing program while still being one of the lowest stormwater utility fees in Eastern Washington.

Ten years later, this utility rate no longer covers the full cost of the program as new permit requirements demand more responsibilities from the county to remain compliant.



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Yakima County's proposed rate increase is \$10.50 above the 2009 rate of \$29.50. Although this fee increase seems large, the proposed base rate of \$40.00 per year per ERU is still one of the lowest stormwater utility rates in Eastern Washington. According to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, approximately half of the \$10.50 rate increase accounts for inflation from 2009 to 2019. The table below compares current utility rates across a few Eastern Washington jurisdictions and shows how Yakima County's rate will continue to be one of the lowest:

Jurisdiction	Annual Rate Per ERU
Yakima County	\$40.00
City of Yakima	\$75.36
Sunnyside	\$67.80
Ellensburg	\$122.40
Chelan County	\$66.00
Wenatchee	\$84.84

- **How does the stormwater utility benefit me?**

Everyone benefits from the stormwater management activities, whether runoff leaves your property or not. Funds from the stormwater utility pay for improvements to the public stormwater system, which reduces flooding risk and improves public safety during storms. Activities funded by the stormwater utility also improve water quality of our local streams, like the Naches and Yakima Rivers, preserving the health and safety of everyone that enjoys playing in and around these beautiful natural resources.

- **Where can I get more information?**

For more information, please visit Yakima County's stormwater management website:

<https://www.yakimacounty.us/1732/Stormwater-Management>

If you have any other questions, please feel free to call 509-574-2300 or email [WaterResources@co.yakima.wa.us](mailto:WaterResources@co.yakima.wa.us) and we'd be happy to help you.