

# COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

## Lower Yakima Valley Groundwater Management Area (LYV GWMA)

### Situation

The [Lower Yakima Valley Groundwater Management Area \(LYV GWMA\) project](#) seeks to reduce nitrate concentrations in groundwater in the Lower Yakima Valley. It is a community-based effort working to improve access to safe drinking water and educating residents and agricultural producers about the problem. Numerous efforts to address nitrate in drinking water are underway in the LYV. Collaborative work is ongoing among LYV GWMA Implementation Committee members, while state and local agencies are also taking individual responsibility for initiatives and regulations.

The GWMA Implementation Committee is enacting 64 recommended actions put forth in the Lower Yakima Valley Groundwater Management Program (Program) and certified by Ecology in March 2021 [Implementation Status \(64 Recommendations\) | Yakima County, WA](#). This Program reflects the work of the LYV GWAC completed in 2018. These actions were identified and agreed upon by the GWAC as effective in reducing nitrate concentrations in groundwater.

Additionally, actions have been requested by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) through a Petition for Emergency Action under Section 1431 of the Safe Drinking Water Act. The immediate priority of these actions is to protect human health by ensuring that residents impacted by nitrate contamination are:

- (1) identified
- (2) provided notice in all applicable languages regarding their potential exposure to elevated nitrate concentration and information regarding the associated health risks; and
- (3) provided the opportunity to obtain alternative drinking water until nitrate contamination in groundwater falls below 10 milligrams per liter (mg/L), the maximum contaminant level (MCL).

With multiple efforts between and within the agencies and ongoing deliverables due to the EPA, GWMA partners need a communications plan to respond to inquiries from the media, the EPA, and other entities, to coordinate information sharing between the local and state agencies and to guide community outreach and education.

### GWMA Goals and Objectives

#### Goals

This Communications Plan supports the goal of the GWMA which is to reduce nitrate concentrations in groundwater below the MCL of 10 mg/L. Additionally, this plan helps guide actions to inform and educate residents about nitrate contamination in groundwater and its health and environmental impacts, provides opportunities to obtain alternative drinking water where appropriate, promotes GWMA activities, and encourages engagement in the process.

## Overarching Objectives

Overarching objectives to achieve program goals include:

1. Identifying all residents that may be impacted by nitrate contamination in groundwater.
2. Educating residents on human health risks of elevated nitrate concentrations and how to protect themselves from that risk.
3. Providing residents with an opportunity to have their well tested for nitrate.
4. For residents with nitrate concentrations above the MCL of 10 mg/L, provide an opportunity to obtain alternative drinking water.
5. Implementing the actions identified by the Program to reduce nitrate concentrations in groundwater below the MCL.

## Key Partners

Upon certification of the Program by the Washington State Department of Ecology, the GWMA Implementation Committee was formed to oversee implementation of the Program. The committee consists of local and state agencies with programmatic or regulatory responsibilities, and private entities engaged in land use practices in the Lower Yakima Valley that are key to reducing nitrate concentrations in groundwater.

The GWMA Implementation Committee is made up of representatives from the following organizations:

- Roza-Sunnyside Joint Board of Control
- South Yakima Conservation District
- Washington Dairy Federation
- Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA)
- Washington State Department of Ecology (Ecology)
- Washington State Department of Health (DOH)
- Yakima County Commissioners
- Yakima County Public Services (YCPS)
- Yakima Health District (YHD)

## Key Audiences

This Communications Plan targets several audiences, each with its own diverse audience subset. These include:

1. Internal Audiences
  - Local, State, and Federal agency partners.
  - Local, State, and Federally elected officials.
  - Governor's office.
  - Policy makers and legislative staff.
  - Yakama Nation
2. Residents and Underserved Community Members
  - LYV private or shared well users.
  - At-risk populations.
  - LYV GWMA residents.

- Community groups.
  - English/Spanish language media.
3. Special Interests
- Large employers in the LYV GWMA.
  - Agricultural commodity groups
  - Social justice organizations.

## **How We Are Engaging our Key Audiences**

Yakima County Public Services hosts the GWMA website and dashboard and acts as a clearinghouse for all GWMA documents and activities. It is the central source of information for ongoing activities in the LYV GWMA and provides metrics on numbers of homes tested, number of wells with nitrate concentrations above the MCL, numbers of homes offered alternative water, and updates on actions to improve nitrate concentrations in groundwater. The website is in English/Spanish to ensure all residents in the community have access to the information. The website is updated regularly. The website and dashboard can be found here:

<https://www.yakimacounty.us/541/Groundwater-Management>

Ahead of each initiative, YCPS, YHD or DOH send direct mailings to homes targeted to participate in the outreach. For example, on August 31, 2023, YCPS sent letters to 161 homeowners with R-O units installed in 2011. The mailing, in Spanish/English, invited households to participate in a survey about their R-O unit, information on health impacts of nitrate, and a number to call at Yakima County Public Services to schedule time for drinking water testing and a technician to inspect the unit. Spanish-speaking operators will be available to take these calls.

YCPS, YHD or DOH will send direct mailings, in phases, beginning in January 2024 when intensive outreach and testing of private or shared wells begins. All mailings are in Spanish/English and metrics on the mailings and responses will be posted to the GWMA dashboard.

YHD will host an Open House in October 2023 to share the results of their focus groups and survey, provide information on the health impacts of nitrate and share copies of the Health Assessment recently completed by DOH.

Other engagement includes social media and quarterly one-page project summaries to further describe actions in the LYV GWMA designed to lessen nitrate impacts to groundwater.

**Media partners.** Local and regional media (print, radio, TV, social media) are important partners in LYV GWMA outreach. News releases, radio and TV interviews and one-on-one conversations with journalists and reporters will be scheduled ahead of and during our outreach campaigns.

## **How We Will Keep Partners Informed**

An interim Project Coordinator from DOH has been assigned to manage, coordinate, and communicate the inter-connected work of the LYV GWMA partners. The coordinator provides weekly updates of Program actions undertaken by GWMA partners, status of work required by the EPA from the petition, and the on-going Legislative Funding work to identify, contact, test and

provide alternative water to homes in the GWMA. The coordinator plays an essential role in managing meetings, content, and deadlines with our partners.

The Implementation Committee meets the second Thursday of each month (via Teams) to discuss joint and individual actions identified in the Program that are underway. Meeting notes are compiled from each meeting and posted to the GWMA website within one week of the monthly meeting.

GWMA Implementation Committee members including state and local agency heads, Yakima County Commissioners, and the governor's office will keep policymakers apprised of GWMA efforts and its relevance to public health. They will work to obtain political support for GWMA at multiple leadership levels and across affiliations and cultivate policymaker support to obtain additional legislative funding. Legislative briefings will be held biannually beginning in the fall of 2023. Leadership and legislative staff will be briefed via Teams or face-to-face meetings and supplemented with support materials.

GWMA agency representatives are further expected to report regularly to their respective leadership, using face-to-face meetings, fact sheets, talking points, or informal presentations on a "need-to-know" basis. Agencies use existing outreach (newsletters, website, Facebook, constituent meetings, etc.) to share GWMA work and provide updates. Agency staff give oral presentations and/or displays at professional conferences, annual meetings, etc.

State agency leads meet monthly with the governor's office to provide updates on all work in the LYV GWMA and build support for legislative funding.

Quarterly meetings are held, in-person, in Union Gap with Implementation Committee members and the EPA to discuss the schedule of activities around identifying, testing, and offering alternative water, accomplishments, and project needs.

Subgroup meetings are held with EPA staff as requested by EPA on efforts to identify, test, and offer alternative water, and on the status of identifying and approving agribusinesses that need to be regulated as Group A systems.

## **Key messages**

- The immediate priority of these actions is to protect human health by ensuring that residents impacted by nitrate contamination are:
  - (1) identified
  - (2) provided notice in all applicable languages regarding their potential exposure to elevated nitrate concentration and information regarding the associated health risks; and
  - (3) provided the opportunity to obtain alternative drinking water until nitrate contamination in groundwater falls below 10 mg/L, the maximum contaminant level (MCL).

- The Department of Health, in collaboration with the Yakima Health District, is providing bottled water delivery to 47 homes in the LYV GWMA.
- Nitrate contamination is a critical public health issue. We are prioritizing swift action to protect drinking water quality.
- Outreach will begin in January 2024 to contact, test, and provide alternative water to homes where nitrate tests show concentrations above the MCL of 10 mg/L.
- The GWMA project is a community-based effort. The goal is to reduce nitrate contamination and ensure that water in the lower Yakima Valley is safe to drink.
- We are working with county, local health, state and federal agencies, agricultural, residential, and environmental partners. Collaboration, coordination, and consultation with local partners are all key to our success in the GWMA.
- We are implementing the GWMA Program's 64 recommended actions, and additional actions, to reduce nitrate pollution and improve drinking water quality.

## Talking points

- The Department of Health is funding a bottled water delivery project in collaboration with the Yakima Health District.
  - As of July 2023, 47 homes are participating in this program.
  - The program is funded through June 2024. DOH will request additional funding through its Foundational Public Health Program in the 2024 Legislative Session to extend this effort.
- Yakima County is the clearinghouse for historic and current LYV Nitrate data, the GWMA Program, outreach, and the Implementation Committee's work. The information is posted to the GWMA website, found here: <https://www.yakimacounty.us/541/Groundwater-Management>
- The Implementation Committee's current focus builds on new data and previous successful collaborative work to identify impacted residents, communicate with them, and offer safe drinking water while working to reduce nitrate concentrations in Lower Yakima Valley Groundwater.
  - The Implementation Committee has drafted a response plan to address actions requested by EPA under the Petition, and important to protect public health. We are coordinating this work with the EPA.
- Nitrates in drinking water can come from a variety of sources, including past and present agricultural practices, failing septic systems, shallow and/or poorly constructed private wells, residential and municipal fertilizers, irrigation, and other commercial activities.
  - Exposure to too much nitrate can make it harder for red blood cells to carry oxygen.
  - Nitrate-contaminated drinking water particularly threatens infants, pregnant people, the elderly, and individuals who are immunocompromised.
  - Agricultural lands can be a source of nitrate contamination if they are improperly managed. South Yakima Conservation District, the Washington State Department of Agriculture and the Washington State Department of Ecology are working individually

and collaboratively to educate landowners throughout the GWMA and identify best management practices to protect water quality.

- Agriculture is a vital part of the Yakima Valley and the state's economy. The Implementation Committee and its members are focused on promoting voluntary practices that protect drinking water without compromising farmers' livelihoods.
- The Departments of Agriculture and Ecology co-implement the CAFO permit program in WA State. The CAFO program is currently focused on 1) ensuring permit coverage for eligible dairy and non-dairy CAFOs, 2) completing timely and thorough inspections and evaluating risk of nitrate contamination, 3) providing technical assistance and oversight of groundwater monitoring at CAOFs – a significant new requirement of the 2023 CAFO permits.
- Residential onsite septic systems can be a source of nitrate contamination. Yakima Health district is updating their homeowner guide on how to maintain their septic system. This information will be shared on the website and through routine and GWMA field work by Yakima Health District and Yakima County Public Services.
- Private domestic wells are not regulated to ensure drinking water meets state health standards.
  - If you have a drinking water well, maintenance and sampling are your responsibility. The state [Department of Health](#) and federal [Environmental Protection Agency](#) have information about well construction and sampling. Sampling your well is the best way to find out what's in it. We recommend annual tests to ensure your water is safe.
- Washington Departments of Agriculture and Ecology lead nitrate reduction efforts in the LYV GWMA. Ecology continues lending support in research, data collection, and technical expertise to help the GWMA project succeed.
  - Ecology is monitoring nitrate levels in 170 wells throughout the GWMA. We currently collect samples each quarter. By June of 2023, two years of quarterly water quality samples had been collected from these wells. Ecology will review the data and identify when annual sampling of the wells will occur in the future. The data provides a snapshot of drinking water quality in the lower valley and will help identify trends over time.

## Tactics (upcoming)

	What	When
YCPS	Revised GWMA web content and dashboard	Updated in real time
YCPS – with support from DOH and YHD	Contact homeowners with under sink R-O units to coordinate inspection of the unit and testing of water.	Initiated August 30 and anticipated end date is November 15, 2023.
Ecology - New COEES role	Community outreach. Lead Ecology efforts to engage the Lower Yakima Valley community on water quality efforts in the Lower Yakima Valley. This position will co-lead the community outreach and engagement efforts of the Implementation committee.	When COEES is hired
Ecology - web team	Update ambient groundwater quality data and StoryMap	September/October 2023
YCPS – with support from DOH and YHD	Contact homeowners in the GWMA and provide a nitrate test strip to test their water. Results that are above 10 mg/L will be offered alternative water. For homes with results above 5 mg/L but below 10 mg/L, a laboratory analysis of their water will be offered	Letters will be mailed to homeowners in phases starting in January 2024.
WSDA	Research and development of nitrogen management decision support tools for irrigated agriculture (pending hire of Agronomist within WSDA's Natural Resource Assessment Section)	Early 2024 and ongoing
WSDA	Inspection of licensed dairy farms and permitted CAFOs, technical assistance provided to all irrigated agriculture as requested (pending hire of GWMA Specialist within WSDA's Dairy Nutrient Management Program and local agreements with South Yakima Conservation District)	Early 2024 and ongoing
WSDA	Education and training for growers focused on nitrogen management (pending hires and local agreement with South Yakima Conservation District)	Late 2024

## Questions and answers

**Q:** How much water in the lower Yakima Valley is contaminated?

**A:** Approximately 24,000 Lower Yakima Valley residents rely on private and shared drinking water wells. During the planning phase to establish the GWMA, 26% of the wells sampled had excess

nitrate levels. It is estimated that approximately 2,000 people are exposed to nitrate levels over the MCL through their drinking water.

**Q:** What is the state's threshold for nitrate levels in drinking water?

**A:** 10 mg/L

**Q:** How are the recommended actions being prioritized?

**A:** The recommended actions are listed 1-64 based on priority. Recommended actions are implemented as funding is available.

**Q:** Can the groundwater be treated?

**A:** Because of the geographic spread of elevated nitrates, it is not feasible to treat the entire aquifer. Implementing Best Management Practices that address potential sources will lead to cleaner groundwater over time. Point of use treatment, however, is feasible for private well owners and has been used to provide safe drinking water to homeowners.

## **Background**

The GWMA was formed in 2012. For more background and a map, see [Groundwater Management | Yakima County, WA](#)

The GWMA advisory committee developed strategies to reduce nitrate levels. The Implementation Committee has implemented several of the strategies, is actively working on several others and continues to seek funding for the remainder.

This Communications Plan has been prepared and approved by the Implementation Committee and is intended for external audiences, the governor's office, and GWMA partners.

## **Media Inquiries**

- Washington State Department of Agriculture – Amber Betts, Public Information Officer, (360) 628-3477
- Washington State Department of Ecology – Emily Tasaka, Central Region Communications Manager, (509) 571-0352
- Washington State Department of Health – Elizabeth Hyde, Communications Consultant, (360) 236-3167
- Yakima County Public Services – Lisa Freund, Yakima County Public Services Director, (509) 574-2300
- Yakima Health District – Stephanie Ruiz, Communications Specialist, (509) 249-6351