



[< Back to Regular Story Page](#)

Hood Canal deserves better than being dead zone

NAKI STEVENS;

Hood Canal is dying. A lack of oxygen is killing fish and other marine life.

Imagine birds falling out of the sky because the air has become so polluted they can't breathe. That is what is happening to wildlife in Hood Canal under its deceptively beautiful surface.

For the last two years, thousands of fish and other marine creatures have died in this polluted waterway. According to Mary Lou Mills of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, this summer the death rate will likely climb.

Shocking? These intermittent fish kills have been occurring since the 1960s. Why haven't we done something to address this problem?

The situation has been thoroughly studied, and the source of the pollution has been identified: excess nitrogen from septic systems, stormwater runoff, agriculture and other sources.

Excess nitrogen leads to excessive algae growth; the algae dies, decomposes and uses up oxygen in the process, leaving little to none for other marine life.

In the mid-1980s, an estimated 17,000 septic systems were discharging untreated or partially treated sewage into Puget Sound and its tributary waterways every year.

According to a 1986 report by the Puget Sound Water Quality Authority, Hood Canal did not offer sufficient land area for properly operating on-site septic systems because houses were located on small lots on the shoreline. The report concluded that septic system problems were also clearly linked to shellfish bed closures.

That was 20 years ago, and the problem has only grown worse.

The situation is bad enough that there is now a ban on fishing for bottomfish in Hood Canal. And \$600,000 in state and federal funding is available for more studies and proposals for solutions.

And while these might be good steps, they are only Band-Aids that address symptoms, not causes. The situation is urgent, and the time for study has passed.

We know where the pollution is coming from. Now is the time to clean it up. Septic systems must be upgraded immediately to remove nitrogen from the effluent. Stormwater pollution must be eliminated through "zero impact" development standards and the use of vegetated buffers to filter out pollutants before they reach Hood Canal. Fertilizers and other agricultural runoff also must be stopped from being carried into the waterways leading to the canal.

Although these solutions are not quick fixes, they are feasible and have a very high likelihood of successfully returning Hood Canal to health if we act now. But we cannot delay. Hood Canal is gasping for air, with a death rattle calling to us for help.

Letting Hood Canal die is not an option. Elected officials must make saving Hood Canal a priority before it is too late. They must support significant funding for an immediate program to do so.

Hood Canal is only the first in what will be a series of dead zones in Puget Sound if we don't take these problems seriously. Citizens should insist that their elected representatives, from the governor to the local level, act now.

Hood Canal is one part of the body of Puget Sound. We can heal that part, and learn a valuable lesson about restoring the rest to health, or we can let it die, leaving Puget Sound to fall into similar ill health.

The good news is that although the situation is critical, it is not too late. Let's tell our leaders we care about Hood Canal, its residents and businesses and the creatures that live there. Let's tell them we care about all of Puget Sound. We can restore these jewels of the Northwest back to health.

Naki Stevens is the program director of People For Puget Sound. For more information, visit www.pugetsound.org.

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