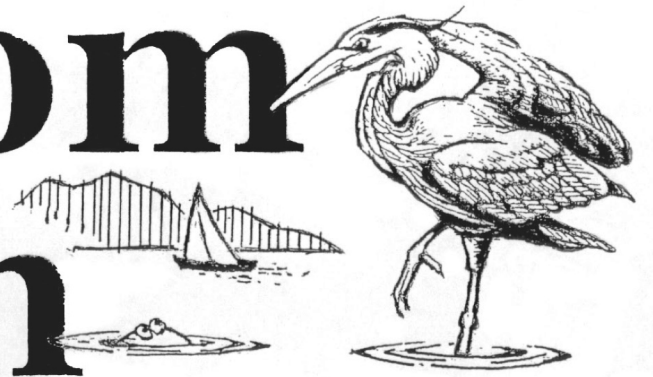


Whatcom Watch



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Annual Joint Lake Whatcom Meeting

What the Data Revealed and What It Didn't

by Kerri Burnside
and Susan Kane-Ronning

Editor's Note: For 22 years, starting in 2004, scientist and toxicologist April Markiewicz provided the community with clear, data-driven analysis of these meetings through her Whatcom Watch articles. Her work set the standard for public understanding of the lake's long-term trends, regulatory requirements, and scientific realities. Whatcom Watch thanks April for her many years of committed reporting. This review continues that tradition of public accountability.

Lake Whatcom is the largest natural lake in Whatcom County and the drinking-water source for more than 120,000 people. It has been listed as an impaired water body since 1998 due to low dissolved oxygen, elevated phosphorus, and fecal bacteria. Under the Clean Water Act, the City of Bellingham and Whatcom County must meet the requirements of a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) to restore the lake to state water-quality standards.

Ten years have passed since the state Department of Ecology (Ecology) finalized the TMDL, which requires reducing phosphorus inputs by just over 3,000 pounds annually by 2066. Now a decade into that 50-year timeline, the annual joint meeting of the city, county, and Lake Whatcom Water and Sewer District offered an opportunity to assess progress. The meeting took place in early April, with elected officials, staff, and community members gathered to review monitoring results, hear program

Kerri Burnside is a lifelong Bellingham resident, member of People for Lake Whatcom, community organizer, and housing advocate. She serves in multiple local leadership roles and is engaged in advancing policies that support housing affordability, environmental protection, and community accountability.

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updates, and discuss policy needs.

Stormwater remains the chief source of phosphorus and bacteria. Impervious surfaces accelerate runoff, while natural forested areas filter water before it reaches the lake. Ecology notes the lake would meet dissolved-oxygen standards if there were 86 percent less development than existed in 2003. Instead, development has increased, and long-term maintenance of private stormwater systems remains inconsistent.

The annual meeting is the only time all three governing bodies convene to discuss Lake Whatcom. What follows is a summary of what the monitoring data showed, what the progress report emphasized, and where the gaps between them remain.

What the Monitoring Report Showed

Dr. Angela Strecker of the Institute for Watershed Studies presented an abbreviated summary of the 2025 Lake Whatcom Monitoring Report. She emphasized that no single indicator captures the lake's condition; instead, four core indicators (dissolved oxygen, phosphorus, algae, and dissolved inorganic nitrogen) must be evaluated together.

Dissolved Oxygen

Dissolved Oxygen (DO) is the amount of oxygen that is present in water and available for aquatic organisms to breathe. High levels of phosphorus means low levels of dissolved oxygen. It is measured in milligrams per liter (mg/L). Fish, insects, and beneficial microorganisms all depend on adequate DO levels to survive.

Long-term decline continues, especially in Basin 1. Data from 1988–2025 show a clear downward trend in summer dissolved oxygen at all depths below 12 meters. Levels below 2 mg/L are inhospitable to most aquatic life; even 2–6 mg/L stresses sensitive species. Basin 2 shows decline as well, though less severe.

Why 12 Meters Matters

The lake stratifies into layers in summer:

- **Epilimnion** (surface)
- **Metolimnion** (middle)
- **Hypolimnion** (deep water)

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photo: Hope Rasa

A doe grazing near a parking lot on the Western Washington University campus on April 20, 2026, in Bellingham. The doe's fur is patchy and discolored, with multiple layers of her coat visible as various areas are in different stages of erosion.

Bellingham's Balding Deer

Deer affected by hair-loss syndrome observed in Washington since mid-1990s

by Hope Rasa

In Bellingham, Wash., the deer are locals. Columbian black-tailed deer, a very common subspecies of mule deer in the Pacific Northwest, are more frequent sights around certain Bellingham neighborhoods than some of their human residents. These deer also wander the campus of Western Washington University, blending in with the herds of students walking to their classes. Some see the deer as nuisances, others see them as friends — either way, they're a part of the community. Lately, however, these staples of the local fauna have been disturbing onlookers with their sickly, disheveled appearance.

For the past few months, most of Bellingham's deer have been walking around with severely depleted fur coats. It's unclear exactly how many deer are impacted. However, most deer out and about in Bellingham neighborhoods like Happy Valley and Fairhaven are missing some or most of their fur, sometimes with pink, irritated skin visible.

Diagnosis: Hair-loss Syndrome (HLS)

HLS is caused by a heavy infestation of Eurasian lice. (1) When deer become infested with these non-native lice, they typically develop a severe allergic reaction. This causes their skin to become irritated, leading the

deer to groom itself excessively.

At first, HLS may cause a deer's fur coat to change in color. This is caused by the removal of guard hairs, the coarse, long top layer of fur that protects the deer's undercoat. (2) Eventually, the deer's hair loss becomes more apparent, resulting in the ragged appearance seen in many of the deer around Bellingham.

These Lice Don't Affect Humans or Pets

While it may cause deer to look alarming, HLS is relatively common and not a sign of mange or any other more severe conditions. Deer with HLS may begin to appear

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