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Polluters' tax a good idea gone wrong

Environmentalists looking for money to clean up Puget Sound hope to make well-placed friends by offering a generous cut of the take.

They're promising \$150 million this year alone to help lawmakers balance the state budget. All the Legislature has to do is nearly triple the tax on petroleum, pesticides and other chemicals.

What's not to like, right? The environmental lobby gets to lock down a funding source for clean water projects, lawmakers get a "green" solution to their budget woes, and no one's the worse for the wear – well, except those big bad oil companies.

Wrong. Environmentalists, in calculating what they could sell in Olympia this year, ignored other political realities – specifically those surrounding the state budget. They'd be lucky to ever see much of the money once they whetted lawmakers' appetite for it.

Communities absolutely need money to deal with polluted stormwater, and the products that cause that pollution is a likely source. Petroleum products alone represent 58 percent of the pollution that washes into the Sound. Retrofitting streets and storm drains to capture those contaminants is enormously expensive.

But diverting the bulk of an environmental tax to the general fund to help cover shortfalls in education and social service programs is not an auspicious beginning.

Dedicated accounts – like the one fed by the existing hazardous-substance tax – exist for a reason: To give taxpayers some assurance that their money is being used for its stated purpose.

Nonetheless, the Legislature has proven itself all too willing to raid dedicated funds when the going gets tough. They took \$180 million from the hazardous-waste account last year and will likely divert more this session.

Now environmentalists want to create a cookie jar with special-made holes for lawmakers' hands. Supporters say the general fund's cut would shrink over time and that by 2015, the money would be all for stormwater and water-quality programs.

We say, good luck weaning lawmakers from those cookies.

Local communities might well need new sources of revenue to help them deal with stormwater problems. The Legislature might be able to make a case that it can't humanely cover the budget shortfall without a tax increase of some sort.

But let's not confuse the two issues.