

Guest Editorial

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Let's get started cleaning up the river

A series of meetings began August 23 to discuss how to put into action the water quality improvement plan for the Spokane River and Lake Spokane. Many interests are at the table -- community leaders, environmental agency leaders, representatives of municipalities and industries that discharge wastewater into the Spokane River, and environmental advocacy groups.

A testament to how important these discussions are for our environment and our economy is participation by Washington state Department of Ecology (Ecology) Director Ted Sturdevant, U.S. Environmental Protection (EPA) Region X Administrator Dennis McLerran, and Idaho Department of Environmental Quality Director Tony Hardesty.

Ecology developed a plan to clean up the river and lake, called the "Spokane River, Lake Spokane Dissolved Oxygen Water Quality Improvement Report." The EPA approved the plan in May.

The river cleanup plan (called a TMDL, or Total Maximum Daily Load report), specifies how much pollution each facility may discharge into the river and still protect water quality standards. The plan also takes into account indirect sources of pollution, such as pollution in groundwater and runoff from urban, residential, and farm land.

The goal of the river cleanup plan is to improve oxygen levels in the river and lake by reducing pollutants like phosphorus. Too much phosphorus causes algae to grow at excessive rates. When the algae decomposes, it uses up oxygen, robbing fish of the oxygen they need to breathe.

Several newspaper stories this summer have reported on concerns coming from cities in Idaho that the plan is unfair because it holds them to stricter pollution discharge limits than Washington, and does not allow for growth in Idaho. The city of Post Falls filed a lawsuit against the EPA for approving the plan.

The plan assigns the same monthly average phosphorus limit of 50 parts per billion to each facility, and we believe this is fair. Facilities that discharge into the river will need to comply with a seasonal March-to-October phosphorus limit. This number varies depending on how frequently a facility tests its wastewater. In Washington, Inland Empire Paper and Liberty Lake sample less frequently and that means we have less confidence in the data. The cleanup plan assigns those facilities, plus those in Idaho, with a slightly lower seasonal limit to make up for the lack of data.

The EPA issues water quality permits in Idaho, but the Clean Water Act prohibits the EPA from issuing water quality permits to dischargers in an upstream state that contribute to a violation of

water quality standards in a downstream state. That's why Idaho was an integral part of discussions about Washington's plan to clean up the river and Lake Spokane.

In the end, there is a maximum amount of pollution the river can accept and continue to be the river we all want it to be. It's a very small amount to divvy-up, and increasing the amount anyone is allowed means reducing the amount someone else is allowed. We feel that a rebalancing of pollution loads, if appropriate, can be addressed as we implement the plan to clean up the river and the lake.

Many of the concerns raised by Idaho dischargers will be addressed as the plan is implemented over the next 10 years. Different types of appropriate adjustments can be made along the way to help facilities meet their new discharge limits. For example, Ecology and the EPA are working on guidelines to give facilities credit toward meeting their discharge limits by reducing pollution from off-site sources when that makes economic sense. This "trading" of pollution credits could be allowed under some circumstances -- as long as the net effect gets us where we need to be -- in compliance with state and federal water quality standards.

Ecology stands behind the river cleanup plan. It is technically sound, reasonable, and fair to all facilities in that discharge into the river, whether they are in Idaho or Washington. We will continue to work towards putting the plan in action. The sooner we begin, the sooner we'll see a river and a lake with cleaner, clearer water. That's where we need to direct our energy and resources -- not toward litigation.

Sincerely,

Kelly Susewind, Water Quality Program Manager

Washington State Department of Ecology