

It's The Environment! The Spokane River

The Spokane River in Washington State is in the news now for two reasons, the first being a withdrawal/denial of the permit for the wastewater treatment plant owned and operated by Spokane County, located near downtown Spokane. The plant has been in operation since the fall of 2011 and has been discharging polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) into the river. The problem was that the permit to discharge said nothing about limiting the PCBs in the discharge, only that the County eventually had to monitor PCBs and sometime later the state would modify the permit to add a limit on PCB discharges. The permit indicated that the modification was likely to happen when the permit was renewed after 5 years, or maybe later. Five years or more of PCB discharges into a river that already has way too many PCBs was considered unacceptable by the Center for Environmental Law and Policy (CELP) and the Sierra Club; they challenged the permit to the state Pollution Control Hearings Board. Just this week the Board agreed with CELP and the Sierra Club, revoking the permit.

Another reason the Spokane is in the news is a possible lawsuit brought by an alliance of Washington state waterkeepers against EPA for failure to require that the state set realistic fish consumption rates. The alliance filed a notice of intent to sue EPA in 60 days. The reason the fish consumption rates matter so much is that the state sets water quality standards to protect human health, based in part on the amount of contamination in fish and the amount if fish people consume. The more fish people are assumed to eat, the lower the levels of chemicals must be in the fish, in order to prevent health effects. Fish consumption in Washington, Oregon and Idaho- -the Pacific Northwest generally - -are considerably higher than the US average, in part due to the higher fish consumption by tribal members. Hence, Washington State's lower than average fish consumption rate makes no sense at all.

The Spokane River does not have a big Superfund site, and is not a Superfund site in and of itself. The fairly short 112 mile run of the Spokane starts in Idaho and winds through eastern Washington before emptying into Lake Roosevelt and forming the famous Columbia River. The Grand Coulee Dam holds back the Columbia/ Spokane to form Lake Roosevelt, and then the waters of the famous Columbia River rush westward to the sea. But along the way, the Spokane picks up contaminants in Idaho and eastern Washington.

Waterfalls are dramatic and magnificent creations of nature with the City of Spokane having more than one, but the largest and most dramatic one is a picture postcard image of water crashing down as mist rises. I have walked in that mist on the footbridge that crosses the Spokane. The view is breathtaking. But the mist is potentially deadly because of the contaminants contained in the waters that form the mist. The Spokane River is contaminated with PCBs, lead, flame retardants called PBDEs, and a few other chemicals. Fish in the Spokane

River are contaminated with various chemicals, including PCBs and lead. Lead contamination in fish is not common- lead does not accumulate, and does not remain long in the blood of animals because kidneys and other organs can remove the lead along with salts. The problem in the Spokane is the mining waste that comes down the river from Idaho, thanks - -most probably - -to the Bunker Hill mining site in the Spokane River watershed.

The state of Washington started the process of PCB evaluation and control via a provision of the Clean Water Act known as a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) analysis. This process applies to waters that chronically fail to meet standards and use requirements. The TMDL identifies all the sources and sink locations of a pollutant and how much the waterbody can handle. The various inputs are given a certain allocation of the total; the discharges become controlled to the point that the waterbody is no longer over-loaded. But Washington State, with EPA agreement, put that entire effort on hold.

The Spokane River and the people who depend on the river or gain so much from it deserve better than half-efforts to end the pollution. The state and EPA need to step up and get serious about requiring the known sources of all contaminants to end the inputs.

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