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Via E-mail

Linda Hoffman, Director
Dave Peeler, Water Quality Program Manager
Rene-Marc Mangin, ERO Regional Director
Jim Bellatty, ERO Water Quality Section Manager
Dave Knight, ERO TMDL Manager
Ken Merrill, Spokane River Dissolved Oxygen TMDL manager
Washington State Department of Ecology

Re: Spokane River Dissolved Oxygen modeling

Dear Ms. Hoffman and Msrs. Peeler, Mangin, Bellatty, Knight & Merrill:

As a matter of policy Governor Locke has publicly and enthusiastically endorsed the concepts of re-use and reclamation of wastewater, and the protection and restoration of instream flows in Washington's rivers. A convergence of Ecology-funded and sponsored activities is now occurring in the Spokane River in which the potential for innovative solutions is at hand. I am writing to ask that the Department of Ecology make Governor Locke's promises real for the Spokane River. I am further asking that Ecology reject a request by the City and County of Spokane to conduct scientific modeling of the River that proposes a scenario of serious degradation.

Ecology is involved in three separate processes that hold potential for interrelated results that would benefit the Spokane River: WRIA 55/57 (and WRIA 54) watershed planning, the Dissolved Oxygen TMDL (and the upcoming temperature TMDL), and the 401 certification of Avista's proposed re-licensing of its Spokane River dams. In addition, Washington state proposes to fund new wastewater treatment plants in this region. Each of these activities has the potential to affect and be affected by instream flow restoration, and together they present tremendous opportunities for coordination of effort by the Department of Ecology. To date, however, this is not occurring.

At yesterday's Spokane River DO TMDL Advisory Group meeting, we were informed that the City and County of Spokane and other dischargers have asked Ecology to run a computer model scenario that assumes that between 100 and 150 cfs of wastewater will be exported out of the Spokane watershed. Frankly, I could not believe my ears. Not only is this scenario highly unrealistic, it would involve irresponsible behavior by public agencies who are currently accepting money from the state of Washington and the Department of Ecology, ostensibly for the purpose of improving the Spokane River. We request that Ecology reject the City/County modeling request and move forward with the drafting and public circulation of the TMDL.

The Department should consider a few salient facts:

- Spokane County has accepted hundreds of thousands of dollars from the Department to prepare a watershed plan for the middle reach of the Spokane River. That plan is supposed to identify instream flow needs and contain strategies to restore flows. The draft watershed plan, issued on July 21, 2004, does contain a flow recommendation for a reach of the River near Idaho. Notably, however, the plan does not recommend any flow for the downstream end of WRIA 57, in downtown Spokane, where the River now runs at its lowest levels in recorded history. Instead, the WRIA 57 planning unit decided to defer that recommendation to the WRIA 54 plan, which means that we will not have an instream flow recommendation for at least another three years. Without an instream flow recommendation, local water purveyors do not have to consider the effect of pumping on the River, nor do they have to do anything about the abysmal state of its flows.
- A related note: the County-sponsored draft WRIA 57 watershed plan identifies annual per capita water consumption in this region at a whopping 328 gallons per day, but contains no requirements for water conservation.
- Spokane County seeks millions of dollars from the state of Washington to fund construction of a new wastewater treatment plant. Because Ecology has informed the County that it cannot permit a plant that discharges new pollutants to the already-impaired river, the County has announced it may export its wastewater to agricultural lands outside the basin.
- Ecology has proposed strict effluent limits as part of the dissolved oxygen TMDL, that will likely require existing dischargers to seasonally dispose of treated wastewater somewhere other than the Spokane River.
- Ecology modeled a scenario for the dissolved oxygen TMDL that shows that more flow in the River could dramatically improve water quality.
- The Department of Fish & Wildlife's review of the Spokane River IFIM study concluded that more flow in the River would help trout habitat. WDFW has also identified wetlands within the Spokane River watershed that would benefit from restoration via reclaimed water.

In the face of all of these studies and activities, it seems unthinkable that Ecology would expend resources to model a scenario in which the City and County of Spokane export treated wastewater away from the Spokane River. Meanwhile, there has been no discussion whatever in the TMDL meetings about beneficial re-use alternatives that could enhance river flows and offset pumping from the hydraulically-connected Spokane Aquifer.

We ask that Ecology reject Spokane County's request to model such a scenario. The idea that Ecology would give money to the County to write a plan that is supposed to (but does not) address instream flow restoration, and then turn around and spend more money modeling a highly adverse instream flow scenario begins to enter the realm of Kafka. Please, just say no.

We further ask that Ecology evaluate its distribution of public funds in this watershed for various projects to ensure those projects meet statutory requirements and are not being used to hold the River hostage. Finally, we ask that Ecology determine how to coordinate its own multiple responsibilities to the Spokane River in a manner that achieves what should be a goal of all activities: to restore the Spokane River to health.

I would appreciate a prompt response to the issues raised in this letter. Representatives of the Sierra Club would be happy to meet with Department staff at any time to discuss these matters.

Yours very truly,

Rachael P. Osborn

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on behalf of Sierra Club
Upper Columbia River Group

cc: WDFW: Hal Beecher, Chris Donley, Doug Robison
Ecology: Bill Backous, Brian Farmer
Spokane County Commissioners Harris, McCaslin & Roskelley
Spokane Mayor Jim West
Spokane City Councilmembers Hession, Rodgers, French, Apple, Shogan, Stark
& Verner