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MEDIA ALERT

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Spokane River dischargers can come into compliance with federal Clean Water Act requirements if they commit to investments in the right combinations of advanced wastewater treatment, water re-use, and conservation. That's the message in a detailed, 60-page proposal released today by Sierra Club's Upper Columbia River Group. The proposal comes after several months of discussions with the Washington Department of Ecology, the U. S Environmental Protection Agency, and representatives for both public and private entities that discharge pollutants into the Spokane River.

"The most important thing we've learned in the past year is there really are ways to get to the healthy river that the Clean Water Act and the Spokane Tribal standards require," said Rachael Paschal Osborn, who directs the Club's Spokane River project. "We don't have to compromise water quality standards and we don't have to wait for another study, or for treatment technology that hasn't been invented yet. We can start putting a plan in place tomorrow."

Sierra Club's proposal is one of two to come out of discussions in the so-called Spokane River TMDL Collaboration. The other proposal was submitted this week by a group of municipal and private entities that discharge effluent to the river.

The TMDL collaboration was convened last spring after the City of Spokane, Spokane County, Inland Empire Paper Company and other river dischargers filed a petition with Ecology seeking to modify proposed pollution discharge requirements—called a "total maximum daily load," or TMDL—that would have forced dramatic reductions of phosphorus and other pollutants. The dischargers agreed to withdraw the petition in exchange for entering into talks with Ecology and other parties to see if an agreement could be reached on how the TMDL could be structured and implemented.

"Our hope is that we're really not that far apart," said Rick Eichstaedt, the Center for Justice attorney who represents the Club on Spokane River issues, "but even if we are, Ecology and EPA should now be in a better position to evaluate how to proceed."

Sierra Club's proposal is to push hard to reduce so-called point source discharges from wastewater treatment plants. Still, the expectation (which dischargers and regulators share) is that treatment upgrades, alone, will not be sufficient to meet surface water quality standards. Consequently, the Club is also proposing major investments in water re-use whereby dischargers would capture treated wastewater and use it to irrigate, golf courses and other appropriate applications.

"The time is right for water re-use in the Spokane—Coeur d'Alene corridor," said Paschal Osborn. "Cities all over the west have been re-using treated, municipal waste water for years because it's a wise use of resources."

In addition to removing pollutants from the river, programs to re-use water will also have the benefit of reducing the large volumes of water being pumped from the Spokane Valley/Rathdrum Prairie aquifer. This will make more cold, clean aquifer water available to the river, particularly during summer months when the river is most vulnerable to pollution and high water temperatures. In late summer, the aquifer is the main source of water for the Spokane River in Washington state.

Sierra Club's proposal also calls for major efforts in water conservation and restrictions on the sale and use of phosphorus-containing dishwasher detergent and fertilizer.

"Certainly a major concern for municipal dischargers is the cost of building and operating advanced treatment facilities," says Paschal Osborn. "But this is an area where the average citizen can make a difference because reducing the amounts of phosphorus that go down the drains not only helps the environment, it also reduces the cost of treating the waste water."

Sierra Club's proposal also favors an aggressive program to address pollution from "non-point" sources such as septic tanks and run-off from agricultural operations.

"Non-point pollution is almost always the most difficult pollution to remedy," said Paschal Osborn. "We have to make a committed effort to doing it but we also have to be realistic about our expectations and conservative in how we apply those expectations to the TMDL implementation plan."

State rules are clear that in compliance plans like a TMDL, credit can be only given to non-point remediation efforts *after* the effectiveness of the effort(s) have been demonstrated.

The Club also proposes a plan to restore stream flow in the Spokane River which has been declining for past 100 years.

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The Sierra Club is the nation's oldest and largest grassroots environmental organization. For more than 30 years, the Upper Columbia River Group, with over 2,000 members, has worked to preserve the best of the Inland Northwest's natural heritage. Through the Spokane River Project, Sierra Club educates and advocates to protect and restore the Spokane River and Aquifer.