

PCBs Contaminate Spokane River

We're Number One – and that's not a good thing

by Rachael Paschal Osborn

The Department of Ecology announced at an August 21 water quality workshop that, when it comes to PCBs, the Spokane River has the dubious distinction of being the most polluted river in the state.

PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) are a group of synthetic chemicals that were commonly used in electrical capacitors and transformers, as well as hydraulic fluids. In 1977 they were banned when scientists revealed that they persist in the environment, accumulate in fatty tissue, and generally cause harmful effects. For more information on PCBs and human health, see <http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/tfacts17.html>.

Even though PCBs have not been manufactured for over 25 years, they are still being discharged into the Spokane River by Kaiser Trentwood, Inland Empire Paper, and the Liberty Lake and the City of Spokane municipal treatment plants. The sediments behind Upriver Dam are so polluted that the state has started a separate toxic cleanup plan to eliminate the PCBs from that site (Kaiser and Avista are the responsible parties there).

PCBs accumulate in fish and can pose health problems to humans who eat those fish. Because of the number and variety of pollutants in the Spokane River (including PCBs, lead, and zinc), the Department of Health has issued a warning to not consume fish that are caught between state line and Upriver Dam. Below Upriver Dam, eat only one fish per month! Children and pregnant women are most at risk.

Ecology is beginning a two-year study to come up with a plan to get PCBs out of the Spokane River. Ecology's water quality clean-up webpage for the Spokane River is <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wq/tmdl/watershed/spokaneriver/index.html>. (Information on PCBs is "under construction.") The draft plan for studying PCBs can be found at <http://www.ecy.wa.gov/biblio/0303107.html>. Or, contact Ken Merrill at Ecology's Spokane office (509-329-3515).

Sierra Club will be commenting as the PCB clean-up process develops. If you are interested in working on this or other water issues, please join the Aquifer & Rivers Committee (ARC). Contact John Osborn for more info: john@waterplanet.ws

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