Spokesman Review

County plant will help river

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Guest Opinion: Bruce Rawls

Even though the project has been under fire, Spokane County expects to receive a draft permit next week to operate its new Spokane County Regional Water Reclamation Facility. There has been much discussion about whether this facility will contribute additional pollution to the Spokane River or will be a part of the solution in cleaning up the river. Spokane County will be an important part of the regional efforts to reduce pollution in the Spokane River.

For the past 30 years, Spokane County has been eliminating thousands of septic tanks in the urban areas of the Spokane Valley, including not only unincorporated land but also the city of Spokane Valley and Millwood. When a septic tank is eliminated, the sewage that previously was disposed of in our sole-source aquifer is collected in a sewer system and conveyed to a wastewater treatment plant. Today, the county collects and treats more than 8.5 million gallons a day of sewage that would otherwise be discharged into the aquifer, our sole source of drinking water.

Historically, the sewage has been sent to the city of Spokane's Riverside Park Water Reclamation Facility. However, that plant has a limited capacity, and in 1999 the city decided that the county should look at other treatment options. The county went through an extensive open process for evaluation of alternatives to provide responsible wastewater treatment, and in 2002 we decided that construction of a new treatment plant was the best option. The Board of County Commissioners directed that the new plant should have the most modern, cutting-edge technology available, which is a membrane bioreactor.

Coincidentally and fortunately, this treatment technology is one of the best for removal of both phosphorus and PCBs, which are problem pollutants for the Spokane River.

In 2010, the Washington state Department of Ecology and the federal Environmental Protection Agency approved a cleanup plan for the Spokane River that focuses on removing phosphorus that depletes the oxygen. This plan requires all of the existing treatment plants and the new Spokane County plant to remove more than 99 percent of the phosphorus from the sewage.

From the beginning, Spokane County has been aware of the concerns about PCBs in the Spokane River. However, we understood that the Department of Ecology was developing a plan to reduce PCBs that would rely on a number of remedial actions toward meeting the water quality standard in the Spokane River over a period of time. The county has supported this approach and will be a part of the PCB solution.

First, the county's plant is scheduled to be operational in November. At that time, at least 6.5 million gallons of sewage can be diverted from the city plant, and will be treated to a much higher level. Based

on small-scale testing of membranes, it is anticipated that 80 percent more PCBs will be removed than if the sewage continues to flow to the city.

Second, the county will perform intensive monitoring in its sewer system to identify sources of PCBs. Locating PCB sources in the sewer system and removing them will further reduce PCBs in the Spokane River.

Finally, Ecology's PCB Assessment Report for the Spokane River revealed that 57 percent of the loads in the river are unidentified. Spokane County has proposed a regional PCB task force to study the sources and locations of PCBs in the Spokane River, and to identify opportunities to remove PCBs.

We have spent over \$450 million on wastewater projects to protect water quality in both the Spokane Valley-Rathdrum Prairie Aquifer and the Spokane River. Contrary to the viewpoint of a few in the environmental community, Spokane County is a part of the solution to cleaning up the Spokane River.

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