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County will get draft sewage permit

New task force helps allay tribe's concerns

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The Spokesman-Review

Spokane County will receive a draft permit Thursday for its new sewage treatment plant to discharge into the Spokane River.

Other Spokane-area dischargers will receive permit renewals.

Those include the city of Spokane, the Liberty Lake Sewer and Water District, the Kaiser Aluminum rolling mill and the Inland Empire Paper mill.

The permits were to have been issued June 1, but they were put on hold when the Spokane Tribe expressed concerns in a letter to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Tribal Chairman Gregory Abrahamson objected that the state Department of Ecology's proposed permit for Spokane County's new sewage treatment plant didn't set specific limits for cancer-causing polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs.

The \$173 million plant is expected to be ready for test operation in August.

Abrahamson said the proposed discharge permit "utterly failed at ensuring compliance with the tribe's PCB standards."

The Spokane Tribe's PCB limit is much stricter than state or federal standards. It is based on higher levels of fish consumption by tribal members.

DOE spokeswoman Jani Gilbert said the tribe's standard applies to Spokane-area dischargers because tribal land is downstream. However, Gilbert said, the tribe's PCB limit is below detectable levels and can't be met with available technology.

The problem was resolved in a meeting last week at which the tribe accepted a plan to form a Regional Toxics Task Force. Gilbert said the DOE-led task force will include the tribal government, dischargers, the regional health district and environmental advocacy groups.

Spokane Tribe officials couldn't be reached for comment Monday, but Gilbert said they supported forming a task force to reduce PCBs as much as possible.

The task force is to oversee scientific studies to identify the sources of PCBs and eliminate the contamination before it enters treatment plants. The task force is to develop a cleanup plan that can be written into discharge permits when they are renewed in five years.

The Spokane Riverkeeper organization – a project of the Center for Justice – had been negotiating the task force approach when Abrahamson's letter to the EPA focused attention on PCBs.

Riverkeeper attorney Rick Eichstaedt, county Utilities Director Bruce Rawls and Gilbert agreed that inability to remove enough PCBs at treatment plants requires rooting them out at their source.

"This isn't something that's going to happen overnight," Eichstaedt said. "It's probably a generational issue, but we need to see progress."

Gilbert said the task force is to be organized by November and have a plan for financing its activities, which eventually could include abatement of other contaminants.

"We would like Ecology to help fund it, but I think we would have to fund a good portion of the cost initially," Rawls said.

The permits to be issued Thursday also resolve Inland Empire Paper Co's. objection that it couldn't meet previously proposed limits on phosphorus, which reduces oxygen for fish by causing algae to grow and decay.

Department of Ecology officials had planned to limit the paper mill's phosphorus release to 1.23 pounds a day from March through October when the algae problem is greatest. But company officials said they couldn't meet the standard with any available technology.

Now the mill's seasonal restriction on phosphorus output will start a month earlier, allowing it to release 2.39 pounds a day without increasing its total.

"It's going to be close, but it's certainly better than what we had before," environmental manager Doug Krapas said.

Inland Empire Paper is owned by Cowles Co., which also owns The Spokesman-Review.

Krapas said the mill's treatment plant releases a different kind of phosphorus that is more difficult to eliminate but also less able to promote algae growth.

The public will have 30 days to comment on Inland Empire Paper's revised permit and 60 days to comment on Spokane County's brand new permit.