

## **Spokesman Review Op Ed**

### **Treatment plant delay won't help environment**

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Spokane County's \$173 million sewage treatment plant is ready to be tested. Conceivably it could be operating by year's end and making an immediate reduction in the amount of PCBs and other contaminants going into the Spokane River.

For now, though, the whole project is stalled, thanks to a protest by the Spokane Indian Tribe over – PCBs. Even though the new plant would remove an estimated 80 percent to 90 percent more PCBs than the city of Spokane's plant is now removing, the tribe has demanded that the level of PCBs in the water be too low to be detected by current lab technology.

As Voltaire put it, "the better is the enemy of the good."

PCB is the shorthand name for polychlorinated biphenyls, a material with qualities that made it suitable for a wide range of industrial uses. Unfortunately, it also poses certain threats to human health, being identified as a probable carcinogen, and it has been almost entirely banned since 1979.

Still, an abundance of PCBs continues to litter the landscape, the legacy of half a century's use throughout the economy. They have been dumped on the ground at industrial sites. They have been scattered by winds and blown into the atmosphere, sometimes descending with raindrops. They can be deposited on hillsides and city streets and be washed into streams, lakes and storm drains.

In bodies of water, they can be ingested by fish, in whose flesh PCBs build to levels that make them unfit for human consumption. That's a serious concern to the Spokane Indian Tribe, whose members' traditional diet includes a large proportion of fish.

So, on May 27, days before the county expected to receive a permit that would allow it to begin testing the new plant, the tribe notified the federal Environmental Protection Agency that it objected to the lack of a satisfactory PCB standard.

There may be more sophisticated filtration processes than the membrane bioreactor that is designed into the county's pending system, but only at wildly prohibitive cost levels. Furthermore, Spokane County Utilities Director Bruce Rawls says studies have shown that all the entities that discharge treated wastewater into the river in Spokane County account for 10 percent or less of the PCBs. More than half come from sources that can't be identified.

(In the interest of transparency, one of those dischargers is the Inland Empire Paper Co., which is owned by Cowles Co., which also owns The Spokesman-Review.)

In the meantime, if the dispute prevents the county from using the new plant, it will keep sending its wastewater through the city's less efficient plant. Result? More PCBs stay in the river than if the county plant were to begin operating.

To resolve the dilemma, Rawls is proposing a regional task force that would collect data to pinpoint sources and quantities of PCBs and design strategies for removal that don't rely on technologies that are neither affordable nor available. It's a reasonable approach, and one that wouldn't prevent the county from achieving the immediate good while waiting for the long-term better.

There's a reason they called Voltaire's age the Enlightenment.