

## **Cooperation best way to keep Spokane River healthy and clean**

Every year, more and more area residents are discovering the beauty and recreational opportunities of the Spokane River from swimming, rafting, kayaking to fishing. Water quality of the Spokane River has vastly improved over the past few decades further enhancing these experiences. So what has brought about this positive change? It has been driven by the public's desire to protect our most valuable natural resource through cooperation and action from local and state governments in Washington and Idaho, state and federal regulatory agencies, environmental groups, industry and elected officials to address environmental concerns that were once a threat to this local treasure.

Over the past decade, municipalities and industries have spent hundreds of millions of dollars to modernize and build state-of-the-art wastewater treatment systems in both Washington and Idaho. The City of Spokane has implemented a comprehensive storm water collection program to keep the city's storm water from overflowing directly to the river during heavy rain events. Significant efforts are also being made to reduce and control non-point source pollution from shoreline erosion, agricultural and livestock run-off, and faulty septic systems.

All these efforts have vastly improved water quality and made the river the healthiest and cleanest in decades. And while much has been accomplished, we recognize that more needs to be done. That is why in 2012, we formed the Spokane River Regional Toxics Task Force (SRRTTF). Members include: City of Spokane, Spokane County, Liberty Lake Sewer and Water District, Inland Empire Paper Company, Kaiser Trentwood, Spokane Regional Health District, Washington State Department of Health, Lake Spokane Association, The Lands Council, Riverkeepers, and the Cities of Coeur d'Alene, Post Falls and Hayden in Idaho. The Washington State Department of Ecology (Ecology) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) serve as advisors to the Task Force and are very supportive of this innovative and cooperative approach as a more direct means of improving the quality of our waters.

Our current mission is to tackle the most difficult problem in the Spokane River, PCBs. This toxic chemical is ubiquitous and can be found in nearly every water body around the world. While PCBs were banned from production in the U.S. in 1978, they can still be found in transformers, capacitors, caulks and paints, and other household products. Unfortunately, EPA regulations still allow PCBs in products such as color inks and dyes at levels that impact our river. SRRTTF is actively working to change these regulations to eliminate PCBs in these products and working with Ecology to help identify what types of consumer products may contain these low level PCBs.

The SRRTTF is working to identify sources of PCBs that continue to enter the watershed and develop a plan for their removal. To start the process, we are actively engaged in water quality data collection. We are currently conducting the first comprehensive and methodical sampling program for PCBs from the outlet of Lake Coeur d'Alene to Nine Mile Dam. The information

from this sampling effort will provide the first comprehensive snapshot of PCBs in our river system.

The good news is recent testing has shown that water quality in the Spokane River has improved and that levels of PCBs are declining. The ban on PCBs and the clean-up of PCB contaminated sites in the Spokane River watershed have had the greatest impact. Avista has implemented a program to remove all PCB containing transformers from the Spokane River watershed. In addition, when all the wastewater treatment improvements are complete, PCBs entering the river from treatment plants are estimated to be less than 1% of what enters those plants.

However, the SRRTF knows we need to work together to do more as evidenced by the continued presence of PCBs in Spokane River fish. Significant improvements in fish PCB levels will take decades because of the bioaccumulative nature of PCBs. What makes these efforts extremely challenging is that we are the first in the country to measure PCBs at these very low levels in the river, and are pushing the limits of technology in both sampling and analytical techniques needed to measure PCB at levels that are important for achieving our water quality standards.

We fully recognize these cooperative efforts will need to continue for years to come given the ubiquitous nature of PCBs. We are convinced that a collaborative effort is the best approach to environmental improvement and is necessary to keep our river healthy and clean.