

Orientation Guide

To Spokane River Regional Toxics Task Force Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) and Current Comprehensive Plan Implementation Efforts

For Interested Parties and New Members, Participants, or Partners

Background

In 2011 a group of public, private, and nonprofit entities in the Spokane River basin agreed that a community-based, collaborative, watershed-wide approach to finding and reducing sources of toxic pollution would provide the best prospects for improving the water quality of the River. Representatives of municipal and industrial wastewater treatment plants joined with nongovernmental conservation groups, health agencies, and state and federal regulators to develop and agree on a memorandum of agreement (MOA) to govern their work to bring the River into compliance with water quality standards.

Overview

This MOA, in conjunction with permits issued by the Washington state Department of Ecology (Ecology) to treatment plant operators under the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) program, authorized the Spokane River Regional Toxics Task Force (Task Force). The parties to the MOA agreed that the Task Force goal would be to develop and implement a Comprehensive Plan (Plan) to bring the River into compliance with applicable water quality standards. Click here for a link to the MOA: <http://srrttf.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/OB5A38-compressed.pdf>

The MOA includes:

- Task Force Vision (page 8): *“The Regional Toxics Task Force will work collaboratively to characterize the sources of toxics in the Spokane River and identify and implement appropriate actions needed to make measurable progress towards meeting applicable water quality standards for the State of Washington, State of Idaho, and The Spokane Tribe of Indians and in the interests of public and environmental health.”*
- Task Force Operating Guidelines (page 9) including a provision that the Task Force may continue to operate beyond 2016 as long as Spokane River NPDES wastewater permits have requirements for participation in the Task Force (which Ecology considers “administratively extended” as of mid-2018).
- Organizational structure and membership, and roles and responsibilities (pages 9 - 14) of the various categories of Task Force participant (Washington and Idaho NPDES Permittees, Agency & Sovereign Governments, Stakeholders)
- Decision-making (page 15), where the Task Force strives for consensus or “unanimity minus one” with support from facilitator
- Protocols for meetings and communications operating protocol (pages 17 - 19); See attached Addendum for additional information on communications principles.

Plan Development

The Task Force worked on the Comprehensive Plan from 2011 through 2016. By the end of 2016, the Task Force had agreed by consensus on 125-page Plan (http://srrttf.org/?page_id=7589). Consistent with the MOA, the plan focuses on finding and reducing PCBs in the Spokane River. By early 2017, the Task Force with associated work groups had begun to implement PCB Control Actions from the Plan.

Plan Implementation

Actions identified in the plan are implemented by the Task Force through work groups. The Task Force has several active work groups. Work groups meet regularly to coordinate implementation actions in the Task Force Comprehensive Plan. Additional information on work groups is found here:

http://srtrtf.org/?page_id=9623

Balance of Interests

The Task Force occasionally decides to have a public presence at events (e.g. the Spokane River Forum) or via media outlets (a letter to the editor of a publication, or a radio interview) at key junctures. For these, to ensure balance, the Task Force usually sends a representative from each major interest area: an environmental nonprofit, a municipal and/or industrial discharger, a government health agency, and/or a representative from a state or federal natural resource agency. This demonstrates the diverse range of perspectives that comprises one of the true strengths of the Task Force.

Conclusion

For more information, feel free to come to a Task Force meeting or participate in one of our Work Groups! You can check our main webpages out at: <http://srtrtf.org/> and <http://spokaneriverpcbfree.org/>. Contact Lara Floyd, Task Force Administrative Coordinator at 509-460-2001 or lara@whitebluffsconsulting.com for additional information on how to stay updated on Task Force activities or get involved.

Addendum

Communication Principles

As might be expected, some Task Force participant entities have periodically adjusted staffing representation since 2011. This, along with the operational shift of moving from planning into implementing PCB control action projects—and pressures created by related-but-separate processes (e.g. litigation related to PCBs, the formal permitting process, various regulatory policies and procedures)—combined over time to strain the trust and functionality of the Task Force member’s working relationships.

In late 2017 and early 2018, Task Force founding members still involved articulated the MOA’s original spirit. Founding members suggested the following common themes:

- When the Task Force wrote the MOA, they wanted to avoid blindsiding: no surprises, share things here first, and avoid rumors. Members shouldn’t represent views of others and should be honest about what the Task Force is and what it is doing. When in public, individuals should represent themselves and their organizations, not the Task Force.
- Ground rules are designed to ensure the continuation of trust.
- No fighting outside the room about what is going on in the room. They wanted to focus on the unified goals. The work of individual entities outside the Task Force do not fall under the MOA. (The environmental community wanted to ensure there was no effort (in the Task Force) to change water quality standards.)

Other things could be going on, but the group would focus on finding and reducing PCB sources. The good thing about the Task Force: they have managed to stay together and focus on goals laid out in the beginning, not representing views of others about the Task Force. For efforts beyond finding and reducing PCBs, individuals need to be able to take their own views.

- At times we have hiccups, and we come together and deal with them. Finding and reducing sources is the shared goal. Though outside matters can affect the conversation, it is a matter of efficiency to focus on what everyone agrees on. The MOA contains what we need to address any issue.
- Though we have completed the Comp Plan the MOA was crafted to address, the Task Force purpose continues: ongoing characterization of sources of PCBs to the River to eliminate or reduce them.
- The MOA includes the implicit message that we all recognize that we are better served by a united effort. As we focus on common problems and understand others’ perceptions, we can better understand each other and better address the problem. We need to honor and respect the relationships that have been built and continue to work on these relationships.