EPA Proposes Stricter Washington Water Quality Standard

by Jeremy FiveCrows, CRITFC Public Affairs

Tribes in the Pacific Northwest regularly eat much more salmon and other fish compared to the general population, with some families consuming more than 10 times the regional average. Since states set allowable water pollution levels based partly on how much fish its residents eat, it is important for this rate to reflect all residents, not just the average resident. In 2011, the State of Oregon increased the fish consumption rate it uses to calculate water quality standards to 175 grams of fish per day—a ten-fold increase from its previous rate. This made Oregon’s standard the strictest in the nation. On September 2, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced a rule setting Washington State’s fish consumption rate to the same level as Oregon’s. This rule came after Washington failed to develop its own acceptable water quality standards and the state legislature failed to pass a toxics reduction bill. The EPA decision was published in the Federal Register on August 2, 2015. The general public has 60 days to comment.

Water quality determines fish quality

Toxic contaminants can negatively impact the health and vitality of fish. A 2002 EPA fish contaminant survey, completed in cooperation with CRITFC, showed that 92 priority pollutants were detected in resident and anadromous fish tissue collected from 24 different tribal fishing sites on the Columbia River. Contaminants measured in these fish included PCBs, dioxins, furans, arsenic, mercury, and DDE, a toxic breakdown product of the pesticide DDT.

Each state is mandated to set water quality standards to protect its residents from toxics and pollutants that may be found in the water. Those standards are based on human health measures including how much fish people eat and an acceptable cancer risk level. Washington’s federally mandated standards are similar to those set in Oregon in 2011. They are designed to protect residents who consume up to 175 grams of fish and shellfish per day. The previous human health criteria were protective of residents who consumed up to 6 grams of fish and shellfish per day. Idaho’s consumption rate is currently still at 6.5 grams per day. The EPA recently rejected Idaho’s request to increase its fish consumption rate to 17.5 grams per day because it was not protective of tribal consumers.

Washington’s new fish consumption rate matches Oregon’s. The federal level is the rate for the entire US. Idaho still uses a much less protective level.

“The need to update human health criteria and water quality standards throughout the Columbia Basin has been a huge struggle for tribes in the
region. Today’s decision by the Environmental Protection Agency is a monumental step forward. It signifies a shift for the state’s residents and the communities who rely heavily on the region’s fish and shellfish for their diets and need protection from toxics in their food,” stated N. Kathryn Brigham, Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission Chair. “Its consistency with Oregon allows us to take a regional approach to improving the water quality of the Columbia River and throughout the Pacific Northwest.”

A Tribal Commitment to Clean Water

The increase of both Oregon’s and Washington’s fish consumption rates was largely tied to tribal communities that rely heavily on fish for subsistence and cultural use. The tribes were actively involved in strengthening these rules in order to protect the health and well-being of their members. The effort is part of a larger goal to protect not only human health and well-being, but to protect fish and the water where they live. Preserving and restoring water quality is one of the goals of Wy-Kan-Ush-Mi Wa-Kish-Wit, the tribes’ salmon restoration plan. As the foundation of the tribes’ First Foods, water holds a fundamental and sacred place in tribal culture. To reflect this central role, every tribal feast opens and closes with a drink of choosh. Keeping water clean and pure is of the utmost importance to the tribes and the ecosystems and natural resources of the entire region.

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Fall Fishery Update

by Stuart Ellis, CRITFC Harvest Biologist

The fall fishery is well under way. At press time, fishers were in the fifth of six scheduled weeks of gillnet fishing. More time may be added depending on catches and run size updates. Bright chinook have returned at numbers much higher than forecast and could perhaps be the third highest upriver bright run on record. Tules have returned at less than forecast, but it is still a good tule run. So far, the tribal fishery has caught over 200,000 chinook, which is significantly above average. With the fishery still running, this number will only get higher. Steelhead and coho returns have been below expectations. Steelhead may end up limiting the fall fishery. Coho returns so far have been the lowest since 1997. One suspected reason for this is the difficulties in collecting sufficient broodstock for coho and steelhead programs.

There has been quite a bit of drift net fishing this fall. Please remember that under the provisions of all four tribes’ regulations, areas closed to set nets such as around river mouths are also closed to drift nets.
Oregon Congressman Visits Lone Pine to Discuss River Housing

Last month, CRITFC Chairwoman Kathryn “Kat” Brigham and Yakama Nation Fish and Wildlife Committee member Wilbur Slockish, Sr. hosted a visit at the Lone Pine in-lieu site for Congressman Earl Blumenauer. The visit provided an opportunity for Chairwoman Brigham and Commissioner Slockish to share tribal concerns about housing needs and public safety issues at the tribal fishing sites along the Columbia River.

The CRITFC leadership shared how tribal members are contending with substandard living conditions as a consequence of displacement by the construction and operation of the federal Columbia River dams. They reiterated the tribes’ position that as long as the dams exist, the United States has a continuing obligation to address the impacts caused by the dams, including the loss of villages and homes along the river.

The visit closed with a discussion on how the tribes and Congress might work together to address these problems.

A resident at Lone Pine from a previous tour shared the reality an hardship of living at the site, which lacks proper services for long-term stays.

Many of the sites are overcrowded like the Cooks access site. Often this results in overwhelmed water and sewer systems and public safety problems.

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Like the Columbia River tribes, the Lummi Tribe in Northwest Washington is faced with the impacts of coal transportation in their homeland. After a wetland on sacred ground was bulldozed to make way for a proposed coal terminal, the Lummi commissioned a special totem pole to raise awareness and strengthen the bonds between the peoples affected by coal transportation. The pole traveled along the coal railroad route from Vancouver, BC to the Powder River Basin coal mines in Montana. When the totem pole came through Portland, CRITFC Executive Director Paul Lumley spoke at the gathering. He highlighted the threat that coal and oil transport is to the Columbia River and the catastrophic effects that a major spill would have on the river, the salmon, and the people and communities who depend on them. After leaving Portland, the totem pole continued its journey upriver, including a stop at Celilo Village.