

Water Quality Team Meeting Notes

August 8, 2006

1. Greetings and Introductions.

The August 8 Water Quality Team meeting was chaired by Mark Schneider, of NMFS, and facilitated by Robin Harkless. The following is a summary (not a verbatim transcript) of the topics discussed and decisions made at this meeting. Anyone with questions or comments about these notes should contact Kathy Ceballos at 503-230-5420.

2. Lower River TDG Monitoring Report Update.

Jim Adams, Jim Britten and Joe Carroll provided an overview of the Corps' draft report on the 2006 water quality monitoring season in the Lower Columbia. They went through the report figure by figure, touching on the following topics:

- The locations of the fixed monitoring stations in 2006: one was located in the Columbia River channel at a depth of 10 meters, and the other was located near the mouth of the Sandy River at a depth of just over 3 meters.
- Monitoring results for each station from May 9 through June 14: monitored for TDG, dissolved oxygen and turbidity; nothing especially remarkable was seen in 2006.

Summarizing the report, Carroll said that little difference was noted between the two stations in 2006 in any of the parameters except for turbidity. This discrepancy may be explained by the relative depth of the gauges, shallow water conditions and wind action at one of the stations. In addition, both stations are likely characterized by water from the Lower Columbia River, with little or no influence from the Sandy River itself. The general direction of observed flow was from the Columbia River toward the Sandy River. No unusual or extreme water conditions were observed there.

It sounds, then, like there were no surprises, said Harkless. That's correct, said Adams – it was kind of interesting to get a chance to go out and look at conditions somewhere other than Camas/Washougal. And did you measure temperature as well? another participant asked. Yes, was the reply. After a few minutes of discussion, there was general agreement that, at least based on conditions in 2006, water quality in the shallow-water habitat in the lower river is not a significant biological concern.

Any suggestions as to additional or different monitoring work the WQT would like to see the Corps do in the future? Harkless asked. Monitoring in other locations was one suggestion, funding permitting; further discussion of the need for additional study was another suggestion, given the limited utility of this data in terms of informing management decisions.

Carroll noted that one thing this pilot study did tell the region is that, anywhere Columbia River water goes in the spring period, there will likely be elevated TDG levels, although those levels may not exceed the waiver standards. Still, he said, there may be some biological effects in shallow-water habitat, even when TDG is below the standard. However, during the time-period of the study, management actions were limited due to the fact that uncontrolled spill was occurring, Margaret Filardo observed.

Jill Leary of the Lower Columbia River Estuary Program noted that LCREP will continue to monitor conditions in the lower river through October, and will provide those monitoring results to the WQT once they are available. She added that LCREP hopes to begin a larger-scale biological study at various depths and locations in the lower river in September 2007.

3. Update on Completion of the TDG Characterization Report.

Harkless noted that comments have now been submitted on the draft TDG characterization report; the purpose of today's agenda item is to hear from the Corps what they see as the next steps in the report development process. Adams said the report is in something of a holding pattern due to funding constraints; at this point, the Corps doesn't even have enough available funding to allow Mike Schneider to finalize the report. He added, however, that the new fiscal year begins October 1, and at that point, at least some additional funding may be available. Adams asked that any additional WQT comments on the report be submitted to him as soon as possible; all written comment received will be reflected in the next iteration of the report. In response to a question, Adams said there will be an opportunity for the WQT to comment on the next draft of the report as well.

4. State Agency TDG Waiver Process.

Andrew Kolosseus said Chris Maynard, who will be attending the next WQT meeting, is the WDOE staff person who is the main point of contact for the waiver process. The main issue, for the Corps, is the different timing of the Oregon and Washington waiver applications, Adams noted – our hope is that we can develop a single unified application package for submission to both states.

Adams briefly reviewed the history of the waiver process and the differences between the waiver processes in Oregon and Washington. Adams noted that the Oregon application is due by November 30; if we could submit the same package to

Washington, at the same time, that would be very helpful, he said.

Harkless then read an email from Agnes Lut of Oregon, which explained that ODEQ will be issuing a single waiver to the federal parties (the Corps and the Fish and Wildlife Service) this time, rather than two separate waivers, as has been done in the past. The information submitted will likely be similar to what has been required in the past. The email noted that Oregon would like to minimize the differences between the Oregon and Washington waiver processes, that there will be a 30-day public comment period after the application is received on November 30, and that ODEQ will make a final staff recommendation for presentation to the Environmental Quality Commission following the public comment period. The EQC will likely take up the waiver at its summer 2007 meeting.

The group devoted a few minutes of discussion to what the information packet submitted with the waiver is likely to contain: a risk assessment, for example, and a Spring Creek Hatchery release operations plan. Adams noted that one other complicating factor is the fact that the new Biological Opinion will not be submitted until February 2007, 3 months after the waiver application is due, so the full details of future years' operations, including the voluntary spill program, may not be known at the time the waiver application is submitted. It's going to take some significant coordination between the state and federal parties to pull together all of the information we're going to need for the waiver application, he said.

Schneider said that, in his opinion, it may be redundant to require an updated risk assessment; we now have several years of monitoring results showing the physical and biological impacts of our operations since 2000, he said. They are consistent with previous monitoring results, which only support what we said in the last risk assessment. Jason Sweet noted that the upcoming Policy Work Group retreats may shed some light on some of these questions. Kolosseus added that there are ongoing public hearings on a proposed change to the EPA water temperature standard; it was agreed that WDOE will share information on this topic via their website as it becomes available.

5. Zebra Mussel Draft Rapid Response Plan.

Stephen Phillips of the Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission and Paul Heimowitz of the Fish and Wildlife Service led this presentation. They distributed copies of the draft zebra mussel rapid response plan, characterizing it as "rapidly evolving." They noted that the plan is intended to guide an emergency response should zebra mussels be suddenly found in the Snake/Columbia system. It was noted that, for the purposes of the plan, "rapid" is defined in terms of days or weeks, not hours.

Phillips noted that, if the plan is to be implemented, written support from NOAA Fisheries, other federal agencies, the state management agencies and the tribes will be crucial – in other words, significant inter-agency coordination and buy-in will need to

occur.

Phillips and Heimowitz went briefly through the contents of the draft plan. In terms of next steps, said Phillips, we're still working through the details of how notification would occur; there is also a placeholder in the document for various scenarios, which we may borrow, to some extent, from other emergency plans. Many of those tasks have yet to be developed. We're also working with Bonneville and the Corps on funding issues, added Heimowitz; one of the questions we have is, in the BiOp, quite a few species will not be addressed. Rock Peters was of the opinion that the Policy Workgroup would be the logical venue to address this topic – we would like to insert a few sentences in the Biological Assessment referring to this plan, he said. Washington has been trying to get an MOU in place to address aquatic nuisance species for some time, and it's been difficult, he said.

We would like to make the MOA as informal as possible, Phillips said, because this is an unfunded mandate at this point, but it does need to be addressed. The controversial aspect, of course, is eradication, said Heimowitz; it isn't going to be easy to get a permit to use chlorine to eradicate zebra mussels given the number of species of concern in the Columbia and Snake Rivers. You would be adding pollutants to the waters of the U.S., so permitting is going to be a challenge, agreed John Picininni. He suggested that it may make sense to obtain copies of any permits that have been issued for zebra mussel eradication elsewhere in the U.S., and to use them as a template for any permit that might be sought for the Columbia/Snake system.

In response to another question, Phillips said prevention is obviously the first line of defense against zebra mussels. And what, exactly, do you mean by "rapid response?" Margaret Filardo asked. Again, we're thinking in terms of days or weeks, rather than, say, hours or months, once the necessary permits are in place, were the reply.

Schneider asked what the RTF can do to help, at this point. Phillips asked that the RTF review the draft plan, and provide any comments or thoughts about advance permitting or points of contact they may have to the state water quality agencies or federal permitting agencies. Phillips added that he will post the report in PDF format so that it can be edited on-line, and will provide copies to Schneider for distribution to the WQT. It was agreed to revisit this topic at the September WQT meeting.

3. Next WQT Meeting Date.

The next Water Quality Team meeting was set for Tuesday, September 12.