# The Spokane River Regional Toxic Task Force

## A (very) Brief History and Some Lessons Learned

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# The Outline

- The History – How did the Task Force develop?
- The Work – What did the Task Force do?
- The Lessons - What was learned?
- The Future – What's next?

# But First…

- The content and observations of this presentation are mine. I respect others, and their perspectives. We didn’t always agree.
- The Task Force was a significant effort for many individuals and organizations. Thanks are due to everyone who  gave their time and effort to this process.
- This was hard…

# The Condensed History

- In 2011 Spokane County completed a new water reclamation facility on the Spokane River and was seeking a discharge permit.

- Recognizing the County's new facility would likely not meet the recently established water quality criteria for PCBs, the Task Force concept was developed by Spokane County and the Riverkeeper as an alternative process.

- Ecology agreed and later issued discharge permits incorporating Task Force participation

# more History

- The Task Force was a non-profit corporation, a 501.C.3, established in 2012 and managed in-kind by Task Force members.
- Members included municipalities, state agencies and environmental organizations from both WA and ID.  Two environmental organizations later withdrew in 2019.
- Initial funding for the Task Force projects came from the dischargers. Legislative funding is now ongoing - $2M/biennium.
- The nonprofit was officially dissolved in 2025.

# The Work

- The Task Force met regularly between 2012 and 2023, developing and implementing a Comprehensive Plan (2016) to identify and remove toxic sources from the river.

- Separate Work Groups
  - Technical Track – extensive sampling and analysis of the river and dischargers, including data management
  - Green Chemistry – evaluating alternative  processes and products
  - Fish Sampling – collecting and analyzing fish tissue
  - Education and Outreach – sharing information is key

# The Work

- Measurable Progress Reports were prepared by Ecology (2016, 2022) to document the activities of the Task Force and determined the progress.
- The 2022 Measurable Progress Report indicates a slight reduction in mean PCB concentrations in the river.
- From 2015 to 2022, over 30 separate investigations/evaluations/reports were conducted.
- The synoptic investigations of river water quality have been very valuable in identifying ground water related impacts.

# Lessons Learned

- Technical Challenges
  - PCBs are known to be in groundwater near the river and appear to be loading the river in select areas.
  - Technology. The water treatment facilities on the Spokane River are state-of-the-art, all using membrane technology. Despite this, these facilities are not able to meet the PCB water quality criteria.
  - Uncertainty. The PCB criteria are near the technological limits of the approved test methods and analytical laboratories.

# Lessons Learned (cont.)

- Administrative Challenges
  - Regulatory overlap – Washington Model Toxics Control Act - clean up levels are not as stringent as the water quality criteria.
  - Political will – The federal Toxics Substance Control Act defines allowable concentrations of toxics in commercial products. Efforts to address this have been futile.
  - Diversity/participation – Over time many of the participants have retired or moved on. Similarly, participation by groups other than permitted dischargers diminished in the final years, affecting public perception and participation.

# What's Next?

- Participation in a recently formed Spokane River Technical Advisory Committee is a new discharge permit requirement.
- There remains a few draft reports from the Task Force that have yet to be finalized; to be decided by the Committee.

- Leverage the Positive: Despite the various challenges, the Task Force was a good example of Community Collaboration.
- Agencies can't do this alone. This is a community-wide challenge that requires a community-wide response.
- Be kind, be humble.

# Thank You!

Questions? Comments?