

# ENVIRONMENTAL Fact Sheet



## Municipal Water Quality Standards Variances, North Idaho

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 10

June 2004

### EPA Grants Water Quality Standards Variances to Local Communities NPDES Permits Allow Time to Reduce Metals

The municipalities of Smelterville, Mullan, and Page received water quality standards variances from EPA this month. The variances allow their domestic sewage treatment plants extra time to reduce the amount of metals they release to the South Fork Coeur d'Alene River.

In a related action this month, EPA issued updated NPDES\* wastewater discharge permits to these three facilities. The permits, which limit the types and amounts of pollutants the treatment plants can release to the river, reflect the variances.

\*NPDES: National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System

**Background:** The municipalities requested the variances from EPA Region 10 in early 2002. Specifically, Smelterville and Page requested variances to the water quality standards for cadmium, zinc, and lead. Mullan requested variances for cadmium and zinc.

There is such a high level of these metals coming into the treatment system through “infiltration and inflow” that the amount going out violates standards. The five-year variances will allow Smelterville, Mullan, and Page to focus their resources on fixing this infiltration problem.

The request was based on a demonstration that the costs to meet the standards for the metals would result in “substantial and widespread adverse economic and social impacts.” EPA granted the variances based on its review of these costs and socioeconomic information. EPA’s Interim Economic Guidance for Water Quality Standards guided that review.

“With these variances, EPA is demonstrating its reasonableness and its sensitivity to economic concerns in Silver Valley, while carrying out its responsibility to protect the environment. EPA is pleased to be working with these communities on their path toward further economic development,” said EPA Regional Water Program Director Mike Gearheard.

**What the variances do:** The variances allow the treatment plants to discharge metals at greater

concentrations than ordinarily allowed. The permittees must make reasonable progress toward making corrections at the plant to meet water quality standards. For example, the permittees must begin investigating and reducing “inflow and infiltration” of metals into the treatment plant. The municipalities can renew their variance if they have demonstrated that reasonable progress has been made towards meeting the standards and conditions for a variance still pertain.

EPA is providing \$800,000 to support the Mullan treatment plant’s demonstration project to address infiltration and inflow problems, as part of a Clean Water Act grant to the area’s Basin Commission. Nearly \$180,000 in similar funding is supporting a South Fork Sewer District Wastewater Treatment Plant phosphorus and metals removal pilot study.

These variances represent the first variances issued in Region 10.

**Hecla’s variance request:** A decision is pending on a similar variance request from Hecla Mining Company for their Lucky Friday Mine. The evaluation of Hecla’s request is separate and similarly rigorous. EPA expects to issue a proposed decision in July. EPA will provide a public hearing and opportunity for comment before making a final decision on Hecla’s request.



United States Environmental Protection Agency

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*Municipal Water Quality  
Standards Variances,  
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**Public participation resulted in permit changes:**

EPA offered a public comment opportunity and held a public meeting on the proposed permits and the variance requests. Changes to the permits were made in response to public comments. For example, the final permit for Page will have “tiered” chlorine limits which change depending on the river’s flow, allowing more flexibility for

the permittee. Also, EPA decreased the amount of required testing to reduce the burden on the permittees while still maintaining an adequate level of compliance monitoring. Requirements to reduce infiltration and inflow were revised from the draft permit to be tailored to the particular needs of these communities.

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**For More Information**

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