



Upper Columbia River Investigation Frequently Asked Questions

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is studying hazardous waste contamination in the Upper Columbia River from the U.S. border with Canada to the Grand Coulee Dam and surrounding upland areas. The study is called a Remedial Investigation and Feasibility Study, and it will take about four years to complete. Field crews will be sampling along the river and reservoir in 2005. Below are questions frequently asked by the public.

Q: *What is a Remedial Investigation and Feasibility Study (RI/FS)?*

An RI/FS is an in-depth study to collect and evaluate data and information at a contaminated site. The purpose of an RI/FS is to: learn how much contamination is present and where it is located; evaluate whether people's health or the environment is at risk; determine if cleanup is needed; and develop and evaluate cleanup options.

Q: *Why is EPA conducting an RI/FS in the Upper Columbia River?*

EPA is conducting an RI/FS because investigation work and samples collected by EPA in 2001 show that contamination is present in river sediment and along shorelines, that fish may be affected, and that further investigation to evaluate risks to people and the environment is needed. Past studies by federal and state agencies have also shown contamination in Upper Columbia River sediments, water, and fish.

Q: *What contaminants are present?*

Contaminants of potential concern in the Upper Columbia River include heavy metals, such as arsenic, cadmium, copper, lead, mercury, and zinc, as well as other chemicals including dioxins, furans, and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs).

Q: *What caused the contamination?*

EPA believes that the majority of contamination comes from Teck Cominco's Trail, British Columbia operations located approximately 10 river miles north of the US-Canada border. For a period of nearly 100 years, the Teck Cominco smelter discharged an estimated 15 million tons of slag (a black, glassy material containing metals) and liquid effluent directly into the Columbia River. Other potential sources of contamination are industrial activities, mining and milling operations, pulp and paper production, landfills, and wastewater treatment discharges.

Q: *Why should I be concerned about the contamination?*

Certain metals, like lead and arsenic, in sufficient quantities or at high enough levels can pose a risk to people who are exposed to contaminated sediments or fish. Heavy metals in sediments and water can be harmful to aquatic life in the Upper Columbia River system. Lead and mercury can harm brain development and the central nervous system. Dioxins, furans, and mercury in fish tissue can be harmful to people who eat the fish. Exposure to dioxins, furans, PCBs, and arsenic may cause cancer and other diseases.

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Frequently Asked Questions *continued***Q: *Is it safe to eat fish from the Upper Columbia River?***

Limits are advised. The Washington State Department of Health has evaluated this question using information currently available and has issued a fish-consumption advisory for mercury in walleye in Lake Roosevelt. Also, there is a state-wide fish consumption advisory for mercury in bass, which includes Lake Roosevelt.

One of the purposes of the RI/FS is to perform an updated comprehensive sampling of fish to re-evaluate this important question. We will be collecting fish tissue samples later this year to give EPA and other agencies a better understanding of the level of contamination in Columbia River fish and permit the Washington Department of Health to perform a re-assessment of this concern.

You can find additional information on Lake Roosevelt and state-wide fish advisories by visiting the website for the Washington State Department of Health at www.doh.wa.gov/ (Click on *Topics A-Z*, and then *F* for *Fish Consumption Advisory*). For more information, contact David McBride (dave.mcbride@doh.wa.gov) or Liz Carr (liz.carr@doh.wa.gov) at the Washington State Department of Health at 877-485-7316.

Q: *How will the RI/FS investigation be managed?*

EPA is the lead agency on this project. We are working closely with the affected land owners and land managers including state, tribal, local, and other federal agencies. The state and local agencies that we are coordinating with include the Washington State Department of Ecology, Washington State Department of Natural Resources, Washington State Department of Health, Washington State Office of the Attorney General, the State Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, local health jurisdictions, and the Washington Department of Economic Development. We are also coordinating with the

Colville Confederated Tribes and the Spokane Tribe on a government-to-government basis. At the federal level, we are coordinating with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, USDOE Bonneville Power Administration, the USDA Forest Service, and the Department of Interior (Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Reclamation, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and U.S. Geological Survey).

The work is being performed by EPA pursuant to the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA, or Superfund) and other applicable laws and regulations.

Q: *What did the U.S. Geological Survey find in its recently released study?*

The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) recently released its final report from a 2002 study of sediment cores taken at six locations in middle and lower reaches of Lake Roosevelt. According to the report, decades of liquid effluent from the Teck Cominco smelter in Trail, British Columbia, contributed most of the zinc, lead, cadmium, and other trace elements detected in the sediment samples. The results also indicate that slag particles found in some sediments showed signs of weathering and breaking down, demonstrating that slag is not inert and may be an ongoing source of contamination in the lake. You can find information on the recent USGS study by visiting the website for the USGS at <http://water.usgs.gov/pubs/sir/2004/5090>.

The USGS study, as well as prior studies, will be helpful to EPA as we conduct our work on the RI/FS.

The results of the EPA study will be used to:

- Help evaluate whether people's health or the environment is at risk;
- Determine if cleanup is needed;
- Develop and evaluate cleanup options.

Q: Why isn't Teck Cominco conducting the investigation?

EPA and Teck Cominco entered into lengthy negotiations in an attempt to reach agreement on an approach for the investigation. Teck Cominco was unwilling to comply with U.S. laws and standards for conducting the investigation. Negotiations ended without an agreement. In December 2003, EPA ordered Teck Cominco to conduct the study under CERCLA. Teck Cominco did not comply with the order. As a result, EPA is conducting the investigation.

Q: Who will pay for the investigation?

EPA is using federal funds to pay for the study. The Agency is committed to the polluter pays principle and intends to recover its costs from the parties responsible for the contamination.

Q: Is there a website for this project?

Yes, visit: www.epa.gov/r10earth/, click on index A-Z, click on U for Upper Columbia River.

Q: How can I get project updates?

Join our mailing list. To be added to the list, contact **Deborah Neal** at 800-424-4372 or neal.deborah@epa.gov. You can also read updates by visiting the project website.

Q: Where can I go to read project documents?

EPA has established eight information repositories for the Upper Columbia River project. These are places you can visit to read project documents. Be sure to call ahead for business hours.

Northport: Northport Town Hall, 315 Summit Street, 509-732-4450.

Colville: Colville Public Library, 195 South Oak Street, 509-684-6620

Inchelium: Inchelium Tribal Resource Center, 12 Community Loop, 509-634-2791

Grand Coulee: Grand Coulee Library, 225 Federal Street, 509-633-0972

Wellpinit: Spokane Tribe Dept. of Natural Resources, 6290 B Ford-Wellpinit Road, 509-258-9042

Davenport: Davenport Library, 411 Morgan Street, 509-725-4355

Spokane: Spokane Library, 906 W. Main, 509-444-5334

Nespelem: Office of Environmental Trust, Colville Confederated Tribes, 1 Colville, 509-634-2425

Q: Who are the EPA project contacts?**Deborah Neal**

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Q: Who do I contact if I need materials in languages other than English?

Contact **Deborah Neal** at 206-553-0115, 800-424-4372 or neal.deborah@epa.gov.

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Q: Who can I contact at local Tribes and other agencies about Upper Columbia River issues?

Colville Confederated Tribes
Patti Stone, 509-634-2415
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Spokane Tribe
Randy Connolly, 509-258-7709, x13
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For contacts at agencies not listed, contact Deborah Neal.



Alternative formats are available. Please call Deborah Neal for special-needs accommodation. TTY users, please call 800-877-8339.