

## **Pollution After the Storm**

New environmental rules for the Spokane River focus on reducing stormwater pollution to protect fish, animals and human health. We have learned that rain water and snow melt are not as pure as we once thought. The atmosphere carries small quantities of chemicals contained in fine dust particles that are carried on the wind across the globe. These global pollutants become included in rain and snow that fall back to earth to form streams and rivers. Even the polar ice caps and the pristine mountains of the Inland Northwest can be affected by pollutants from cities and countries around the world.

New rules for the lower Spokane River have been established to protect the health of people who eat fish contaminated by PCBs. PCBs are toxins that can cause cancer. PCBs are a group of man-made chemicals found in tiny amounts nearly everywhere in the environment, but when they get into the aquatic environment they become more concentrated by a process called bio-magnification. What this means is that as PCB-contaminated organisms are eaten by larger animals, the amount of PCB chemicals is greatest in animals at the top of the food chain. For example, an aquatic insect living in the gravel bed of the river will have some PCB stuck to it and inside it. A fish that eats many insects accumulates a large quantity of PCBs because PCBs are mostly stored in fat tissue. When a bear or human eats several fish that have eaten many insects, the concentration of PCBs stored in their fat tissue gets even higher. PCBs are very slow to breakdown and go away. Even though the production of PCBs was banned in America more than 40 years ago, a small quantity is still circulating around in the environment. Also, some other countries have not yet banned PCB production. This allows new releases of the chemical into the environment where it enters the hydrologic cycle and can travel thousands of miles in rivers, ocean currents and the atmosphere.

When it rains or snows, runoff from our lawns, roofs and parking lots enters the streets and gutters, and flows eventually to the river via the storm sewer system. Even though freshly fallen rain and snow might contain tiny quantities of PCBs and other contaminants, surface water runoff accumulates more contaminants as it travels across soils, parking lots and roadways. PCBs have been found in transformers, motor oil, paint, caulk, dyes and news print. Oil spots in parking lots and roads get washed into the streets to combine with trash and debris as the runoff travels downhill to the nearest storm drain and into the river.

To protect fish, animals and human health, everyone can help reduce PCB pollution in the Spokane River by keeping their cars well maintained and properly disposing of trash and debris. Draining automotive fluids into the street, gutter or storm drain is a bad idea. Doing so could contaminate the Spokane River in Idaho and Washington and result in expensive cleanup efforts and legal consequences.

For more information about the Surface Water Management Program, visit the City of Post Falls website at <http://www.postfallsidaho.org/> or call 208-777-9857.