

Draft Meeting Minutes Kootenai Valley Resource Initiative
May 3rd, 2023 10:00 a.m.
TDML Sub-Committee Meeting Boundary County Annex Building

Agency/Others in Attendance:

Bill Lillibridge Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission
Bob Blanford, Business & Industry
Bob Steede, Idaho DEQ
Brandon Glaza, USFS
Caleb Davis, Office of Rep. Fulcher
Dave Wattenbarger, Private Citizen
Ed Atkins, Corp. Ag/Landowner
Eric Zimdars, USACE
Jake Garringer, Governor Little's Office
Jennifer Ekstrom, Idaho Conservation League
Jerry Garten, Citizen
Kent Easthouse, USACE
Kevin Greenleaf, Private Citizen
Kierstin Cox, KTOI Administrative Assistant
Mike Klaus, City of Bonners Ferry
Theresa Wheat, KTOI, KVRI Facilitator
Tim Bertling, Boundary County, KVRI Co-Chair
Todd Higans, Idaho DEQ

Theresa Wheat called the meeting at 10:05 she facilitated introductions around the room as well as zoom attendees

Todd Higans Presented on the topic of pollution in the Elk River caused by mining operations in Canada. The pollution, primarily excess selenium, is entering the river system and affecting aquatic life, as well as potentially posing a risk to human health.

Selenium in the Kootenai River

Selenium is a naturally occurring metal in trace amounts that is essential for aquatic life. However, it becomes toxic in elevated concentrations. The Kootenai River has two assessment units that are listed as "Not supporting" for the Cold-Water Aquatic Life Beneficial Use due to elevated levels of selenium. The pollutant was listed based on USGS and Kootenai Tribe of Idaho egg/ovary selenium data.

Several treatment options were mentioned, such as iron-coated sand in swales, microfiltration, and wastewater treatment at the mines. It was emphasized that the mining companies need to treat their pollution before sending it downstream into the United States. The group also discussed the need to pressure the mining companies to reduce pollution and not open new mines until they can get the problem under control.

The International Joint Commission was also brought up as a potential solution. The commission, established under the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909, needs a referral from both the US and Canada to come up with solutions that would work for both countries. It was noted that the highest levels of government in the US, including the Department of State and the EPA, are in unison in saying that a referral to the commission is needed. However, it was suggested that support from Idaho Republican Congresspeople would be helpful in bolstering the request.

The group discussed the mining operations in the Elk River and the scale of the mines. The open pit mines are huge and can be seen from Google Earth, with some having a diameter of up to 8 miles. The

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group discussed the need to prevent new mines from opening and to reduce the pollution caused by existing operations.

The group agreed that action needs to be taken to reduce pollution in the Elk River and prevent further harm to the environment and public health. The International Joint Commission was seen as a potential solution, and treatment options were discussed. The need to pressure mining companies to reduce pollution and prevent new mines from opening was also emphasized.

The monitoring program is managed by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which is working with the Kootenai tribe of Idaho to collect samples from the mine to Kootenai Lake. Meanwhile, the EPA's program is more focused on the Idaho reach, with monthly sampling at several locations, including Twin Rivers boat ramp, Bonners Ferry Bridge, Copeland Bridge, and Port Hill going back into Canada.

Kootenai/Moyie tributary temperature logger discussion

There was a discussion about temperature loggers for the Kootenai and Moyie tributaries.

It was suggested that deploying loggers in the tributaries would provide data that could help in understanding selenium behavior in the Kootenai River.

There was also a discussion about the best approach for deploying loggers and the types of loggers that should be used.

The program follows a quality assurance project plan, with data evaluation, quality control officer, and duplicates blanks to ensure rock-solid data that's harder to dispute. The samples are filtered to take dissolved selenium, with additional metrics such as temperature, conductivity, PHDO, dissolved oxygen, and turbidity measured for informational purposes. The results show selenium levels fluctuating around 1 part per billion, with the highest value of 1.69 measured in March 2023. While the levels are well below the toxic level of 3.1, fish tissue readings above 15.1 kg/dry weight indicate adverse effects on fish.

The data collected through the program shows that selenium levels remain below toxic levels but have adverse effects on fish. The EPA's monitoring program is ensuring that the quality of data collected is high, making it difficult to dispute. The monitoring of tributaries is eliminating possible sources of selenium and preparing for a future TMDL. The meeting concluded with a call for continued monitoring and research to protect the health of the Kootenai River ecosystem.

Meeting was adjourned at 11:57am

Meeting Record prepared by Kierstin Cox