

Portland turns to Plan B to deal with the EPA's clean-water demand

Posted by Rebecca Lacy November 03, 2008 21:58PM

Here's the latest idea how to avoid a \$300 million-plus bill demanded by the federal government to clean up Portland's water supply even though it remains singularly pristine:

Forget the city's famed open reservoirs -- decommission them as holding tanks. Maybe they'd remain as signature water features. But whatever the city decides: no covers -- an earlier plan to put lids on the almost century-old reservoirs stirred up a tidal wave of opposition.

Instead build another underground reservoir at Powell Butte and possibly one at Kelly Butte to replace their capacity.

Try again to convince environmental regulators that the city doesn't need to build an ultraviolet-treatment plant to zap water from the Bull Run watershed. The river and the surrounding forestland on the west side of Mount Hood are regarded as one of the nation's highest-quality drinking-water sources.

The strategy is the city's Plan B response to rules developed under the federal Clean Water Act that require unfiltered public drinking water systems such as Portland's to eliminate 99 percent of a microscopic parasite called cryptosporidium. The parasite can cause diarrhea and, in extreme cases, can be fatal for people with compromised immune systems.

Plan B became necessary when Portland last year lost a lawsuit challenging the rules.

City officials still believe they can win an exemption to avoid treating Bull Run water, but a separate part of the rule dealing with open reservoirs is a different matter.

"We're still going through the process, but it's fair to say that it is going to be beyond difficult," said City Commissioner Randy Leonard, who oversees the Water Bureau.

The cost of building a treatment plant and replacing the reservoirs has been estimated at \$335 million. The City Council approved a 2 percent rate increase this year and plans similar increases over the next few years to build a fund to soften the blow.

That's a lot of money to combat what city officials say is a nearly nonexistent problem.

The city hasn't found a single cryptosporidium spore anywhere in the water system for six years. But the federal law says water systems must do what they can to deactivate the parasite, and it specifically bans using a cost-effectiveness analysis.

"Our position has been there won't be any measurable health benefit from having to treat the water further," said David Shaff, Water Bureau administrator. "The EPA said prove it; we said, 'OK we will.'"

Shaff is confident the city can avoid building an ultraviolet treatment plant in the Bull Run, which is off-limits to most human activity -- recreation, agriculture and logging. As a Water Bureau report puts it: "The underlying premise of Portland's 100-year strategy is you don't have to worry about taking out of the water supply things that you don't allow to get into the water supply in the first place."

But Shaff said an exception isn't possible for the city's five open reservoirs -- three on Mount Tabor and

two in Washington Park. They're more vulnerable to contamination. Earlier this year, for example, two people were cited for skinny-dipping in one of the Mount Tabor reservoirs.

"Even if we got EPA to say we don't need to treat it further, when water comes into the open reservoirs, it is exposed to the environment. Viruses can be introduced. Even if we didn't have crypto problems, we couldn't meet the clean-water standards," Shaff said.

The city is still negotiating with EPA over how to test for cryptosporidium in the watershed. The city must show that the source water meets a standard of less than one spore per 10,000 liters. Shaff said the city won't actually apply for an exemption from the water-treatment rule until some time next year.

In the meantime, the city is working on plans to bury a second 50 million-gallon tank on Powell Butte. But that would replace only a fourth of the storage capacity in the existing open reservoirs. One possibility is an underground tank at Kelly Butte.

"We'll figure out a fix, but we haven't got there yet," Shaff said.

Floy Jones of Friends of the Reservoirs, which successfully fought the city's previous effort to cover the reservoirs, said the city shouldn't give up asking the EPA to exempt them from the federal rules.

"There's no science" behind the open-reservoir rule, she said. In 2002, for instance, the EPA found health issues with buried reservoirs, but none with open systems, she said.

The city should appeal to Congress if the EPA won't budge, Jones said.

But Leonard said he doesn't think such an approach would work. Stronger Democratic majorities will probably doom any move seen as weakening environmental protection, he said.

The city has reached no decision about what to do with the existing reservoirs, other than to take them off-line. Leonard said one option is to maintain them as water features, which may be easier if they don't need to provide drinking water. He's against covering them.

But Jones worries about what will happen when maintenance isn't required to keep the water systems operating.

"They are not ornaments," she said. "They are functional."

In any event, the federal clock is ticking. The city must comply with the new rules by 2014.

"Right now we are on two paths, but at some point it has to become one path," Shaff said.

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nlittlejohn says...

I have toured the watershed and it seems to me that the EPA is behind the times and needlessly inflexible on this one. I imagine we could find a few better things to do with a third of a billion dollars.

Perhaps we all need to write them and our representatives in DC on this local issue they may need to see for themselves to understand.

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