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Study: Technology not available to meet proposed water quality standards

Municipal ratepayers, consumers to face significant costs for standards that can't be met

OLYMPIA — Even the most advanced technology available today cannot meet limits driven by the state's proposed water quality standards — and would potentially cost billions with little or no benefit to the environment.

Those are the key findings from a new report issued today by the state's three largest trade associations for businesses, cities and counties.

The report, "Treatment Technology Review and Assessment," was conducted by HDR Engineering, Inc. to assess the cost and effectiveness of advanced treatment technologies to meet these revised limits. The Association of Washington Business (AWB), the Association of Washington Cities (AWC) and the Washington State Association of Counties (WSAC) commissioned the report.

The review was prompted by the state's effort to update its surface water quality standards for toxics, in part based on revised estimates of how much fish people eat (referred to as the "fish consumption rate" or FCR). This affects industrial and municipal dischargers – businesses, cities and counties that discharge into public waters.

One goal of the state Department of Ecology's effort is to provide greater health protections for high fish-consuming populations — a goal shared by employers and local governments around the state.

AWB, AWC and WSAC believe a dramatically more stringent water quality standard, like that recently adopted in Oregon, is literally impossible for affected municipal and industrial facilities to meet. Oregon's standard is considered the most stringent in the nation, the impacts of which

have not yet been felt since no major permits have been issued since the standards were adopted.

HDR's analysis focused on four very difficult-to-treat pollutants expected to be in the effluent of the state's municipal and industrial wastewater treatment facilities: PCBs, mercury, arsenic and benzo(a)pyrene — a commonly encountered hydrocarbon byproduct.

Their findings: Even the most advanced water treatment technologies would not be able to meet standards for the four targeted pollutants. Any businesses or local governments would be in violation of the proposed standard, despite making significant investments in technology that would not work.

HDR's treatment technology review anticipates additional capital, operating and environmental costs (e.g. higher energy usage) as a result of industrial and municipal efforts to meet the proposed standard.

"Cities around the state support Governor Inslee's efforts to find a balanced and practical solution to this issue," said Mike McCarty, CEO of the Association of Washington Cities. "Cities collectively operate hundreds of treatment plants cleaning up hundreds of millions of gallons of wastewater each day. We believe utility ratepayers shouldn't be faced with billions of dollars in investments that still expose them to significant legal liability because standards can't be met. Some cities estimate residential utility bills could increase to as much as $200 a month under this scenario," he said. "Instead, we'd like to find a creative and balanced solution that looks at the sources of the toxics and how to get and keep them out of the water."

HDR's analysis also suggests significant implications for private sector employers and the state's economic climate if the proposed water quality standards are adopted.

"What this study underscores is the need for balance in our conversation about water quality standards. We need clean water and we need to protect human life, but we also need a standard that can be reasonably met with existing technology," said Don Brunell, president of the Association of Washington Business.

"As the study notes, even if our members do make the required investments, they still won't meet the proposed standards. And that just feeds uncertainty – about permitting, about growth and expansion of business and, eventually, about jobs in Washington state," he said.

"New businesses are unlikely to locate here given a standard like this. And existing businesses won't invest in technology that doesn't meet standard. So they'll close up shop and move elsewhere. And that means the potential loss of jobs, particularly in rural areas of Washington state that cannot take another massive industry shut down.

"We have to work together to find a solution that works for everyone. This study confirms the proposed standards will not get us where we need to be," he said. "We have to keep working on a more equitable solution for everyone."

A PDF copy of the HDR study is available here.

About the Association of Washington Business

Formed in 1904, the Association of Washington Business is Washington's oldest and largest statewide business association, and includes more than 8,100 members representing 700,000 employees. AWB serves as both the state's chamber of commerce and the manufacturing and technology association. While its membership includes major employers like Boeing, Microsoft and Weyerhaeuser, 90 percent of AWB members employ fewer than 100 people. More than half of AWB's members employ fewer than 10. For more about AWB, visit www.awb.org.

About the Association of Washington Cities

Founded in 1933, the Association of Washington Cities (AWC) is a private, non-profit, non-partisan corporation that represents Washington's cities and towns before the state legislature, the state executive branch and with regulatory agencies. Membership is voluntary. However, AWC consistently maintains 100% participation from Washington's 281 cities and towns. A 25-member Board of Directors oversees the association's activities.

About the Washington State Association of Counties

Created in 1906, the Washington State Association of Counties (WSAC) is a voluntary, non-profit association serving all of Washington's 39 counties. WSAC members include elected county commissioners, council members and executives from all of Washington's 39 counties. The Association provides a variety of services to its member counties including advocacy, training and workshops, a worker's compensation retrospective rating pool and a forum to network and share best practices. While voting within the organization is limited to county commissioners, council members and county executives, the Association also serves as an umbrella organization for affiliate organizations representing county road engineers, local public health officials, county administrators, emergency managers, county human service administrators, clerks of county boards, and others. In addition, we work closely with our sister organization, the Washington Association of County Officials (WACO), which serves independently elected non-judicial county officials including auditors, treasurers, prosecutors, coroners, clerks, and sheriffs.

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