Fact Sheet:
Trump EPA's Toxic Plans for Washington Waters

Public comments due October 7, 2019

In May 2019, without giving notice to tribes, state officials, water quality advocates, or the public, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced plans to revoke protective water quality standards for Washington state. This action reverses a 2016 decision by the Obama-administration EPA which required the state to improve water quality standards for multiple toxic pollutants that accumulate in fish tissue and harm people, orcas, and other species.

What are water quality standards?

Washington's water quality standards set pollution limits for different pollutants in our waters. They include numeric limits on human exposure to toxic chemicals in drinking water and locally-caught fish. Regulated toxics include mercury, arsenic, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), lead, and various industrial chemicals that cause human health concerns including cancer, neurological damage, and reproductive issues. In 2016, EPA issued strong standards based on years of research, engagement with tribal nations and public comment.

Why does EPA want to allow more toxic chemicals in rivers and Puget Sound?

In 2017, industrial polluters filed a petition to the EPA to rescind the strong standards, siting cost concerns. Under the Trump administration, EPA caved to corporate interest and plans to roll back Washington's protective standards to benefit polluters.

Strong water quality standards are critical to protect human health. One major change proposed by EPA will weaken the standards for PCBs. PCBs are carcinogenic, build up in fatty tissue, and discharged in waste streams in Washington. PCB's and mercury commonly cause fish consumption advisories for the Columbia River and other waterways in Washington. Endangered orca whales are some of the most toxic animals on the planet due to PCB contamination. EPA's rollback will disproportionately harm tribal communities, fisher communities, and those that consume more fish by permitting more toxic chemicals—including PCBs—in our waters.

Visit ColumbiaRiverkeeper.org/take-action to submit a public comment to EPA.