

Guest Opinion

## Working every day for a healthy river

By Sarah Hubbard-Gray, on behalf of the Spokane River Stewardship Partners  
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The health of the Spokane River has improved significantly over the past 30 years. Much of the credit is due to the efforts of members of the Spokane River Stewardship Partners (SRSP). The SRSP include Spokane County, the cities of Spokane, Coeur d'Alene and Post Falls, the Liberty Lake Sewer and Water District, Hayden Area Regional Sewer Board, Avista and Inland Empire Paper Company. The SRSP fully support protecting our region's most valuable environmental resource, the Spokane River. In fact, they consider it essential to their jobs and the well-being of the communities in which they work and live. The SRSP is a unique coalition of government and business organizations comprised of experienced conservationists, engineers, scientists and operators, whose responsibility is to protect and improve water quality.

The SRSP are members of our communities who are tasked with investing both public and private funds to implement measures to improve water quality. These public and private partners are uniquely positioned to provide the leadership necessary to maintain and improve the health of our precious river. As partners they are working together and with government agencies, Tribes, conservation groups, and the public to address water quality concerns and provide the technical expertise to meet some of the most stringent water quality standards in the world.

SRSP members have installed modern wastewater treatment plants in many of our communities, including Spokane, Liberty Lake, Coeur d'Alene, Hayden and Post Falls to treat our waste and to reduce the use of septic systems that can contaminate our water supplies. SRSP operators regularly upgrade and improve their plants as new technologies become available and continuously monitor treatment performance. The purity of treated water from many of these facilities has reached a point where it can be beneficially reused for irrigation, industrial use, wetland restoration or groundwater recharge.

For example, Spokane County is building a state of the art water reclamation facility that will treat wastewater to ultra clean levels and is also leading a regional study to reduce phosphorus nonpoint sources into the river. Inland Empire Paper Company has invested over \$9 million in innovative wastewater treatment upgrades over the past 5 years in a proactive effort to meet new and more stringent water quality standards. The City of Spokane is conducting an 18 month treatment technology study to identify the best ways to remove phosphorus. The City of Coeur d'Alene is completing significant upgrades to their plant to reduce ammonia. Liberty Lake Sewer and Water District recently spent \$12 million upgrading its treatment plant to remove 80% more phosphorus.

Various pilot studies have been conducted by SRSP members to prepare for expanding reuse of reclaimed water, including the City of Spokane 'Reuse Technology' studies at Downriver and Qualchan Golf courses. Livestock feed and poplar trees are grown at Hayden Area Regional Sewer Board's water reuse farm. Avista is planning to make significant investments in water quality improvements in the river and Lake Spokane. Under the new Spokane River Project license, Avista will increase minimum flows during dry years, provide aesthetic flows at Spokane Falls, and make significant investments in water quality and the fishery resource. Combined, the SRSP members are making substantial investments to improve the health of the Spokane River for use by the entire community.

The Spokane River is our region's crown jewel and we are blessed with a resource that provides both recreational and job opportunities. The river has been the backbone of our region's history and culture,

and continues to be a significant part of our economy, providing jobs in recreation, agriculture, municipal operations, power generation and industry. The SRSP members provide living wage jobs for many of our community's families, friends and neighbors. Industrial partners also bring hundreds of millions of outside dollars into our local economy and provide a significant portion of our tax base.

The Spokane River Stewardship Partners are the leaders of today and tomorrow with the expertise to solve what some believe to be impossible challenges. They are committed to working with everyone interested in protecting our watershed and openly invite public participation to assist in their mission to work every day for a healthy river.

*Sarah Hubbard-Gray works for GeoEngineers and has been retained by the Spokane River Stewardship Partners to help with coordination and facilitation.*