

Boise River will play guinea pig for cleanup

'Trading' aims to aid farms, industry

By Rocky Barker
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Federal and state regulators are tapping the Boise River to test a plan to use the free market to clean up pollution.

They hope to reduce the cost of cleaning up the 57 miles of river between Lucky Peak Dam and the Snake River by using pollution trading — a system that allows farmers to make money by cleaning up more of the river than they are required to.

If it works, Boiseans and other urban residents could face smaller sewage bill rate increases.

And the concept could be expanded to help clean up 962 rivers and streams that must be finished by 2005 under a federal court order.

"If a city can pay someone to reduce their pollution capacity, that's good for ratepayers," said Bill Jarocki, director of Boise State University's Environmental Finance Center.

Here's how it would work.

A daily limit would be set for a specific pollutant allowed to empty into the Boise into the Snake River. Individual polluters, including cities and industries, would be allocated a certain amount of pollution. The rest would be allocated by tributary for pollution from farm and urban runoff.

If one polluter can reduce the amount of pollutant below its limit, it could sell the difference

See Pollution / 15A

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\$1.50

POLLUTION

From Page 1A

to other polluters.

For instance, it may cost a farmer \$1 to remove one pound of pollutant from the river by preventing runoff. But a city or industry, which would have to build an expensive treatment plant, could face 10 times his cost.

The farmer could make a tidy profit that could finance his basic cleanup costs.

"It seems it can be a win-win solution for the people that participate," said Sherl Chapman, Idaho Water Users Association executive director.

The Boise River was chosen because farmers, cities, industries and environmental groups already have been working together to write a plan to clean up pollution.

"We have a pretty good working relationship," said Marti Bridges, of Idaho Rivers United. "If this is ever to work, the Boise (River) is the most likely place to pull it off."

The Idaho Division of Environmental Quality has proposed cutting siltation into the river by a third and bacteria pollution by 90 percent.

It held off proposing a limit on phosphorus until limits are determined for Brownlee Reservoir down-

stream.

The pollution trading experiment is using phosphorus as a starting point, since reducing it significantly could be very expensive for Boise and other cities.

Farmers could build wetland collecting ponds to settle out phosphorus in the runoff from their fields. Or they could take steps to reduce the amount of runoff in the first place.

Establishing a pollution market won't be easy. The buyers must have assurances they are buying true reductions in pollution. That will take extensive monitoring beyond what's done now.

And the group must figure out how to ensure that if a landowner has signed a contract to reduce pollutants, all future buyers are tied to the same commitment.

"I think it needs a lot more study yet," said Fred Sarceda, a Wilder farmer.

National environmental groups have been skeptical of pollution trading, though Bridges is a cautious supporter.

"The framework has to be crafted in such a manner as to not allow backsliding, it must result in environmental benefits in any locale on the river, and it needs to meet federal and state water quality standards," Bridges said.