

## Benzene levels at City Beach exceed federal standards

### Whitefish Pilot

By RICHARD HANNERS  
Thursday, August 9, 2007



The Whitefish City Council learned Monday about pollution in Whitefish Lake and Whitefish River caused by a gasoline-related compound.

Whitefish Lake Institute director Mike Koopal said samples exceed federal drinking water standards, 5 micrograms per liter, and recommended action.

The institute has continued its study of gasoline pollution in the lake caused by motor boats, Koopal said. Sampling near City Beach on Fourth of July this year found benzene levels exceeding the federal standards.

"This is a concern because children occasionally swallow water while swimming, and benzene can also be inhaled or absorbed through the skin," he said.

Koopal recommended the city install a catchment system at the boat ramp so people can safely drain their oily bilges without further contaminating the lake.

Water samples taken at State Park also exceeded federal drinking water standards. Lake water samples taken in the past two years did not contain benzene levels exceeding the federal standard, and benzene levels elsewhere in the lake were not as high.

"Something is going on at these boat launching sites," Koopal said. "It could be excessive idling, holding patterns while boats are waiting to come in or people draining their transoms."

The first step could be putting up signs warning boaters about dumping their bilges, but a catchment system was really needed, he said. A matching grant through Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks could provide up to \$35,000 for the system, he said.

The water quality committee looked at the impact of 2-cycle engines and opted not to be heavy-handed by recommending an ordinance banning 2-cycle engines, Koopal said. He said there's a nationwide trend toward manufacturing less-polluting 4-cycle engines for watercraft.

Koopal said he testified this year at a Montana Senate hearing on a bill banning 2-cycle engines. He said the committee learned on the day of the hearing that the bill was unconstitutional because it interfered with interstate commerce.

Pollution in the Whitefish River has also been a concern of the water quality committee. Benzene levels in samples taken from oily seeps on the bank of the river near the Spokane Avenue culverts were 39 times higher than federal drinking water standards allow.

Over the course of the year, this could add up to thousands of gallons of highly contaminated water entering the river, Koopal said. He said he is frustrated with the Montana Department of Environmental Quality's timeline to resolve this on-going situation.

After smelling samples Koopal took from the seeps, the city council agreed it was time to move to the next level. City staff had contacted the Montana Department of Environmental Quality without a satisfactory resolution.

Councilor John Muhlfeld recalled that DEQ responded quickly to sediment running off private property next to Hellroaring Creek and wondered why DEQ was not responding quickly to this matter.

The councilors called for a letter requesting immediate action be sent to DEQ management in Helena, with copies going to Gov. Brian Schweitzer and property owners near the pollution site.

At councilor Nancy Woodruff's suggestion, the city will also request assistance from the Flathead County hazmat team so the pollution could be contained. Right now, several straw wattles are all that stand between the oily seeps and the river.