

Pay less today, pay much more tomorrow

Marty Trillhaase The Lewiston Tribune | [1 comment](#)

On the eve of the Great Recession,

Idaho was spending \$18.2 million on its environmental watchdog agency.

Three years later, the Department of Environmental Quality is getting by on almost \$4.4 million less.

You can't blame that on an anti-environmental and anti-regulatory agenda on the part of Idaho's Republican majority. DEQ's 24 percent budget loss is in line with other state programs - higher education, 22 percent; agricultural research, 28 percent; Idaho State Police, 30 percent; public schools, 7.5 percent.

Nor does Idaho stand out. As John Miller of The Associated Press reported, state after state is balancing its budget in part by scaling back on environmental protection. Among 24 states surveyed by the Environmental Council of the States, the average agency saw its budget sliced \$12 million, or 11.5 percent.

Even though many state budgets now are stabilizing, imminent cuts at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will impose more pain through the loss of federal grants that flow into state environmental agencies.

Just the same, there's no getting around the fact Idaho is putting off until tomorrow what it should be doing - more cheaply and effectively - today. And it's acting in the name of not raising taxes or even raising user fees charged to people who do business with the DEQ.

So here is what you get:

- In order to issue permits allowing businesses and communities to discharge pollutants into rivers, the EPA needs to know how healthy those waterways are. It relies on the state for that information, but lack of money put Idaho out of the water quality monitoring business. Earlier this year, lawmakers restored funding - but only temporarily.
- Air quality monitoring equipment used in areas such as Sun Valley during the 2007 forest fires have been idled.
- Five years ago, DEQ inventoried lakes and reservoirs throughout southern Idaho. Every place it looked it found fish contaminated with mercury. With those findings, the agency was able to warn pregnant women and children against eating too much fish. It also joined with environmentalists to track down the source of that mercury - gold mines in Nevada. The study has not been updated, so it's not clear whether the situation in Idaho has improved or deteriorated. Also

discontinued were three air quality monitors detecting mercury contamination in rainfall.

- At one time, DEQ was actively identifying abandoned mining sites and trying to stop dangerous compounds, chiefly arsenic, from leaching into the ground water and surface water. Conservationists say the agency is pursuing only a few mines and it has no resources to clean them up.
- Contributions toward improving water quality at Bear Lake on the Utah border as well as Lake Pend Oreille, Pend Oreille River, Priest Lake and Priest River have been cut.

Nobody's talking about hot-button environmental disputes - global warming, wolves, salmon, dams or megaloads - that can provoke a fight on any Idaho street corner. These are bread-and-butter concerns: keeping the water safe to drink, the air fit to breathe and maintaining a respectful, cooperative relationship with industries that must comply with those laws.

Just because Idaho is deferring these matters doesn't stop the bills from coming due. Usually, it's cheaper to prevent a mess today than to clean one up tomorrow - just ask the folks involved with removing toxins from the Silver Valley in the north or Idaho National Laboratory in the south.

If today's unmet needs fester into huge headaches tomorrow, people stuck with resolving these problems will look back with disgust at our shortsightedness. - M.T.