Montana DEQ's Approach to a Standardized Sediment Assessment Protocol: A Biological Consideration in the 303(D) Listing Process

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The Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) has been delegated by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to implement provisions of the Clean Water Act. This includes submitting a 305(b) report every two years to the EPA describing the condition of all waters within the state's jurisdiction and creating a 303(d) list of impaired waters. This reporting process involves assessing water quality for various parameters including sediment, metals, and nutrients. DEQ is currently reforming the assessment process by addressing inconsistencies in the way assessments were performed in the past and writing standardized protocols that will lead to more consistent decisions regarding impairment determinations. Here we focus on the assessment protocol being developed for sediment; a pollutant that can cause harm to aquatic life and fisheries. DEQ has applied the "Sufficient Credible Data/Beneficial Use Determination" since 2000. This process is well suited for an initial (screening) assessment, but has been challenged on the grounds of rigor and reproducibility by stakeholders when a specific pollutant is identified as harming a beneficial use. Our approach to this reforming process has been to study the literature, what other states have developed for assessment protocol, and methods that have already been developed by DEQ.

Current considerations for what may be included in the assessment protocol will be discussed. We would like this process to be in the open for the public to comment and contribute. DEQ welcomes input in the process via a wiki page found at http://montanastag.pbworks.com and/or contacting any of the contributing authors.