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## River rules loom large for some

*State worries small cities can't pay for **phosphorus** reductions*

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FAYETTEVILLE — The four largest cities in the Illinois River watershed probably can afford the millions of dollars they'll spend to reduce **phosphorus** in their sewer plant discharges.

Arkansas officials said Thursday they have concerns about the ability of smaller cities such as Prairie Grove, Lincoln and Gentry to pay for improvements necessary to reduce **phosphorus** in discharges to 1 milligram per liter.

That's the limit Siloam Springs, Springdale, Rogers and Fayetteville agreed to meet on July 8.

"The smaller cities are a little fearful of the limit that the four bigger cities will meet," said Mary Leath, chief deputy director of the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality. "We're going to review the plans of the smaller municipalities that we know have limited resources and see what we can do."

Arkansas and Oklahoma officials on Thursday ended a two-day discussion about how to reduce **phosphorus** in four Arkansas rivers that flow into Oklahoma, including the Illinois River. Oklahoma has set a limit of 0.037 milligrams of **phosphorus** per liter of water.

**Phosphorus** at high levels promotes algae growth, giving the water a slimy feel and a green appearance. When the algae die, the decay consumes oxygen and can suffocate aquatic life.

Officials leaving the closed-door talks said Thursday's discussion was less tense than Wednesday's. Tempers flared Wednesday as officials were discussing nonpoint sources of **phosphorus** such as poultry farms. **Phosphorus** from litter that's used in poultry houses leaches into the soil when it's spread on fields to fertilize hay. Prairie Grove Public Works Director Larry Oelrich said he's convinced after meeting with officials from both states that making \$1 million worth of improvements to reduce **phosphorus** might not be worth the cost.

The plant that treats about 260,000 gallons of water each day contains about 3.6 milligrams of **phosphorus** per liter. By comparison, Springdale discharges 14 million gallons of water per day.

"The benefits of the small cities doing that can't be justified based on the cost," Oelrich said.

Randy Young, the director of the Arkansas Soil and Water Conservation Commission, said Thursday that Arkansas has asked for a consent decree signed by officials from both Arkansas and Oklahoma.

Young envisions the decree including Arkansas' guarantee that it will register all poultry farms, create comprehensive poultry litter management plans for farms and limit **phosphorus** flowing from sewer plants to 1 milligram per liter.

Oklahoma, in return, would promise not to file lawsuits if the scenic rivers continue to exceed 0.037 milligrams of **phosphorus** per liter.

Oklahoma and Arkansas officials concede they don't know how much farm registration, management plans and sewer plant limits would succeed in reducing **phosphorus**.

"No one action is going to solve our problem," said Jon Craig, water-quality director for the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality.

"It's not a matter of 'Will we?' It's not a choice. Right now, it's 0.037. That's what we are shooting for. All of us want progress toward that, but it may take years," he said.

Arkansas officials worry that Oklahoma could expect more from Arkansas if 0.037 isn't met. "It's a valid concern," said Derek Smithee, water-quality director for the Oklahoma Water Resources Board.

Officials as part of their talks on Thursday stopped long enough to watch a video showing the Rogers sewer treatment plant. The city has reduced its **phosphorus** discharge to less than 1 milligram per liter even though it's not been required. "How can you not help but be encouraged that a city not required to do it does it anyway?" Craig said. "That's a terrific sign."



Mary Leath of the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality and Derek Smithee of the Oklahoma Water Resources Board answer reporters' questions after the second day of negotiations on Oklahoma regulations on **phosphorus** in six scenic rivers. Four of the rivers start in Arkansas.