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Ohio EPA Accepts Comments on Draft Certifications for Vessel Discharges

Ohio EPA has issued two draft certifications that would authorize ballast discharges from Ohio vessels into waters of the state in conjunction with U.S. EPA's draft general permit for vessel discharges, which provides federal authorization of vessel discharges.

Ohio EPA will hold a public hearing on Monday, June 25, 2012 at 5:30 p.m. at Huron Public Library, 333 Williams Street, Huron. At the meeting, Ohio EPA will present information, answer questions and accept public comments on the draft certifications. The hearing will end when everyone has had an opportunity to testify.

The first draft certification would cover vessels less than 79 feet that carry less than 8 cubic meters of ballast. These would not be required to follow treatment standards, but would need to follow best management practices. The second certification covers vessels larger than the limits above.

The Ohio certifications and federal permit work together to protect water quality while allowing a wide variety of discharges from vessels into waters of the state including ballast water, bilge water and gray water. Ballast water is taken into or discharged from ballast tanks to maintain the stability of a vessel. The discharges would contain water mixed with suspended sediments.

In Ohio, no discharge of sediments from ballast tanks would be authorized in waters subject to these certifications. In addition to federal requirements (available in U.S. EPA's general permit), all vessels with ballast water tanks would be required to have a ballast water management plan. Mandatory practices would need to be demonstrated in this plan, including plans to:

- avoid discharges in waters near national parks, national monuments and national wildlife refuges;
- avoid discharge or minimize uptake of ballast water in areas known for infestations, populations of harmful organisms or pathogens, areas near sewage flows, areas near dredging operations, in darkness where bottom-dwelling organisms may rise up the water column and in shallow water where propellers may stir up sediment;

- provide a ballast tank cleaning schedule to remove sediments mid-ocean or in port under controlled conditions or at dry dock;
- discharge only the minimum amount of ballast water essential for vessel operations and minimize what is considered essential; and
- provide requirements for discharging water in port.

Additional ballast water management practices apply to vessels confined to the Great Lakes upstream of Welland Canal. For other vessels, discharge standards issued by the International Maritime Organization would apply.

U.S. EPA's schedule allows vessels with ballast water capacity between 1,500 and 5,000 cubic meters until January 1, 2014 to meet standards, and other vessels have until January 1, 2016. New vessels would need to meet standards when launched. Vessels discharging ballast water in Lake Erie would need to continue salt water ballast exchange even after discharge standards come into effect.

These certifications apply statewide and would be valid for five years, only allowing discharges that would have a minimal impact on the environment.

Persons wishing to be on Ohio EPA's interested parties mailing list, or wishing to submit written comments can mail them to Ohio EPA's Division of Surface Water, Permits Processing Unit, P.O. Box 1049, Columbus, Ohio 43216-1049, or e-mailed to eric.nygaard@epa.state.oh.us. Comments will be accepted through Monday, June 25, 2012. Ohio EPA will consider all comments before finalizing the new certifications.