



DEPARTMENT CIRCULAR

DEQ-12, ~~PARTS A and B~~

~~Montana Base Numeric Nutrient Standards~~
~~and~~ Nutrient Standards Variances

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This circular ([DEQ-12B](#)) contains information [about variances from the base numeric nutrient standards pertaining to the base numeric nutrients standards \(§75-5-103\(2\), MCA\) and their implementation. It is divided into **Parts A and B.** This information includes details on effluent treatment requirements associated with general nutrient standards variances, as well as effluent treatment requirements for individual nutrient standards variances and to whom ~~these they apply.~~ ~~Part A contains the water quality standards including concentration limits, where they apply, and their period of application. Part A is adopted by the Board of Environmental Review under its rulemaking authority in §75-5-301\(2\), MCA.~~](#)

~~Part B contains information about variances from the base numeric nutrient standards. This includes effluent treatment requirements associated with general nutrient standards variances, as well as effluent treatment requirements for individual nutrient standards variances and to whom these apply.~~ [Part Circular DEQ-12A contains the water quality standards including base numeric nutrient standards' concentration limits, where they standards apply, and their period of application. Circular DEQ-12A is in a separate document also available from the Department. Part Circular DEQ-12A is adopted by the Board of Environmental Review under its rulemaking authority in §75-5-301\(2\), MCA. Unlike Part DEQ-12A, Part DEQ-12B \(this circular\) is not adopted by the Board of Environmental Review; Part DEQ-12B is adopted by the Department following its formal rule-making process, pursuant to §75-5-313, MCA.](#)

The Department has reviewed a considerable amount of scientific literature and has carried out scientific research on its own in order to derive the base numeric nutrient standards (see References in [Part DEQ-12A](#)). Because many of the base numeric nutrient standards are stringent and may be difficult for MPDES permit holders to meet in the short term, Montana's Legislature adopted laws (e.g., §75-5-313, MCA) allowing for the achievement of the standards over time via the variance procedures [found here](#) in [Part Circular DEQ-12B](#). This approach should allow time for nitrogen and phosphorus removal technologies to improve and become less costly, and to allow time for nonpoint sources of nitrogen and phosphorus pollution to be better addressed.

Circular DEQ-12B

DECEMBER 2013 EDITION

1.0 Introduction

Elements comprising Circular DEQ-12, ~~Part B~~ are found below. These elements are adopted by the Department following the Department's formal rule-making process. Montana state law (§75-5-103 ~~{(22)}~~, MCA and 75-5-313, MCA) allows for variances from the base numeric nutrient standards (found in ~~Part A of this e~~Circular DEQ-12A) based on a determination that the base numeric nutrient standards cannot be achieved because of economic impacts, the limits of technology, or both.

1.1 Definitions

1. Long-term Monthly average means ~~a description of effluent data from a treatment system using standard descriptive statistics and an assumption that the data follow a lognormal distribution~~ the sum of the daily discharge values during the period in which the base numeric nutrient standard applies divided by the number of days in the sample. See also, "Technical Support Document for Water Quality-based Toxics Control", Document No. EPA/505/2-90-001, United States Environmental Protection Agency, 1991.

2.0 General Nutrient Standards Variances

Because the treatment of wastewater to base numeric nutrient standards in 2011 would have resulted in substantial and widespread economic impacts on a statewide basis (§75-5-313 ~~{(5)}{a}~~, MCA), a permittee who meets the end-of-pipe treatment requirements provided below in **Table 12B-1** may apply for and ~~DEQ~~ the Department shall approve a general nutrient standards variance ("general variance") (§75-5-313 ~~{(5)}{b}~~, MCA). The Department will process the general variance request through the discharge permit, and include information on the period of the variance and the interim requirements. A person may apply for a general variance for either total phosphorus or total nitrogen, or both. The general variance may be established for a period not to exceed 20 years. A compliance schedule to meet the treatment requirements shown in **Table 12B-1** may be granted on a case-by-case basis. The final permit limit will be expressed as a load only.

Cases will arise in which a permittee is or will be discharging effluent with nitrogen and/or phosphorus concentrations lower than (i.e., better than) the minimum requirements of a general variance, but the resulting concentrations outside of the mixing zone still exceed the base numeric nutrient standards. Such permitted discharges are still within the scope of the general variance, because the statute contemplates that a general variance is allowable if the permittee treats the discharge to, **at a minimum**, the concentrations indicated by §75-5-313(5)(b)(i) and (ii), MCA. Thus, permitted discharges better than those at §75-5-313(5)(b)(i) and (ii), MCA, are not precluded from falling under a general variance. In a permitted discharge, the interim limitations provided for under a general variance (or an

individual variance) will apply, even if such limitations differ from those that might otherwise apply based on takes precedent over a wasteload allocation derived in a for a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL). The interim limitations will apply during the time period over which the variance is applicable.

Table 12B-1. General variance end-of-pipe treatment requirements per §MCA 75-5 -313(5)(b), through May 2016.

Discharger Category ¹	Monthly Average	
	Total P (µg/L)	Total N (µg/L)
≥ 1.0 million gallons per day	1,000	10,000
< 1.0 million gallons per day	2,000	15,000
Lagoons not designed to actively remove nutrients	Maintain current performance	Maintain current performance

¹ See Endnote 1

The Department must review the general variance treatment requirements every ~~3~~ three years to assure that the justification for their adoption remains valid. The review may not take place before June 1, 2016, and must occur triennially thereafter. The purpose of the review is to determine whether there is new information that supports modifying (e.g., revising the interim effluent treatment requirements) or ~~deleting/terminating~~ the variance. If a low-cost technological innovation for lowering nitrogen and phosphorus concentrations in effluent were to become widely available in the near future, for example, the Department could (after May 2016) make more stringent the concentrations shown in **Table 12B-1**. If, after May 2016, the Department were to adopt general variance treatment requirements more stringent than those provided in **Table 12B-1**, revised effluent limits will be included with the permit during the next permit cycle, unless the demonstrations discussed in **Section 3.0** below are made. A compliance schedule may also be granted to provide time to achieve compliance with revised effluent limits.

The Department (and the Nutrient Work Group) will consider specific factors, listed below in this paragraph, whether or not more cost-effective and efficient treatment technologies are available when determining whether the general variance treatment requirements must be updated in accordance with §75-5-313(7)(a) and (b), MCA. The review will occur triennially and will be carried out at a state-wide scale, i.e., the Department will consider the aggregate economic impact to dischargers within a category (the > 1 MGD category, for example).

1.—Whether more cost-effective, efficient, and innovative nutrient removal technologies are available.

2. ~~Whether Montana's economic status had changed sufficiently to make nutrient removal more affordable. If new technologies (per 1 above) have not become widely available, the Department will estimate on a statewide basis the cost for facilities within a category (per §75-5-313(5)(b)(i) and (ii), MCA) to move to the next more stringent nutrient treatment level. Nutrient treatment levels are defined in Falk et al. (2011)⁴.~~
3. ~~Whether development of permit limits for base numeric nutrient standards should be revised to reflect N or P compound speciation and bioavailability.~~

Based on the triennial review [preliminary](#) findings and conclusions, the Department will issue a [rulemaking proposal solicitation](#) for public comment on [the nutrient concentrations and conditions associated with](#) the [three](#) general variance [categorie](#)s. The proposal will solicit comments from the public on whether the general variances should be: (1) re-adopted without changes, (2) re-adopted with changes, or (3) ~~deleted~~[terminated](#). Based on the review conclusions and [the](#) public comment, the Department will ~~revise Montana's water quality standards to reflect either (1) new interim limits to apply during the variance or (2) the continuation of the previous interim limits.~~ [draft final findings and conclusions. If the findings and conclusions indicate that the general variance\(s\) should be modified or terminated, the Department will initiate rulemaking to do so.](#)

2.1 Wastewater Facility Optimization Study

Permittees receiving a general variance are required to evaluate current facility operations in order to optimize nutrient reduction with existing infrastructure and shall analyze cost-effective methods of reducing nutrient loading, including, but not limited to, nutrient trading without substantial investment in new infrastructure (§75-5-313 ~~{(9)}{(a)}~~, MCA). The Department encourages permittees to examine a full array of reasonable options including, ~~{but not limited to,}~~ facility optimization, reuse, recharge, and land application. The Department may request the results of the optimization/nutrient reduction analysis within two years of granting a general variance to a permittee.

Changes to facility operations resulting from the analysis carried out as above are only intended to be refinements to the wastewater treatment system already in place. Therefore, optimizations:

1. ~~S~~hould only address changes to facility operation and maintenance and should not be structural changes;
2. ~~S~~hould not result in rate increases [or substantial investment; and](#)
3. ~~m~~ust include exploration of the feasibility of nutrient trading within the watershed.

How the analysis is to be conducted, and by whom, is left to the discretion of the permittee. The Department encourages the use of a third-party firm with expertise in this subject.

⁴ See Endnote 2.

3.0 Individual Nutrient Standards Variances

The following sections describe (1) the basis on which for an individual variance, ; may be justified two different types of and (2) an alternate method for deriving appropriate interim requirements effluent limits for an individual discharger. individual nutrient standards variances (“individual variance”). For both of these types of individual variances, the final permit limit will be expressed as a load only.

3.1 Individual Variance Based on Substantial and Widespread Economic Impacts

Montana law allows for the granting of nutrient standards variances based on the particular economic and financial situation of a permittee (§75-5-313-~~{1}~~, MCA). Individual nutrient standards variances (“individual variances”) may be granted on a case-by-case basis because the attainment of the base numeric nutrient standards is precluded due to economic impacts, limits of technology, or both. ~~In general, i~~ individual variances discussed in this section are generally intended for permittees who would have financial difficulties meeting the general variance concentrations, and are seeking individual nitrogen and phosphorus permit limits tailored to their specific economic situation.

Like the general variance in **Section 2.0**, individual variances may be established for a period not to exceed 20 years and must be reviewed by the Department every three years to ensure that their justification remains valid. Unlike the general variances discussed in **Section 2.0**, the Department will only grant an individual variance to a permittee after the permittee has made a demonstration to the Department that meeting the underlying standards would require water quality-based controls that result in guarding the substantial and widespread social and economic impacts. The variance application will identify the lowest effluent concentration that is feasible based on achieving the highest attainable condition. that would be incurred from meeting the underlying standards.

A permittee, using the assessment process referred to above, must also demonstrate to the Department that there are no reasonable alternatives ~~(including, but not limited to, trading, compliance schedules, reuse, recharge, and land application)~~ that would allow compliance with the base numeric nutrient standards. If no reasonable alternatives exist, then an individual variance is justifiable and becomes effective and may be incorporated into a permit following the Department’s formal rule-making process. Like any variance, individual variances must be adopted as revisions to Montana’s standards and submitted to EPA for approval. Individual variances the Department may adopt in the future will be documented in **Table 12B-2** below.

Since ~~T~~the basis of this type of individual variance is related to will often be the economic status of the a community or permittee, i.e., the demonstration of substantial and widespread economic impacts. At at

each triennial review the Department will consider if the basic economic status of ~~that a~~ community or permittee ~~granted an individual variance~~ has substantially changed. The same parameters used to justify the original individual variance will be considered. If new, low-cost nutrient removal technologies have become widely available, or if the economic status of the community or permittee has sharply improved, the basis of the variance may no longer be justified. In such cases the department will discuss with the permittee the options going forward, including, but not limited to, a permit compliance schedule, trading, reuse, recharge, land application, or a general variance.

Based on the triennial review preliminary findings and conclusions, the Department will issue a rulemaking proposal/solicitation for public comment on the individual variances. The proposal will solicit comments from the public on whether each variance should be: (1) re-adopted without changes, (2) re-adopted with changes, or (3) terminated. Based on the review conclusions and public comment, the Department will ~~revise Montana's water quality standards to reflect either (1) new interim limits to apply during the variance or (2) the continuation of the previous interim limits~~ draft final findings and conclusions. If the findings and conclusions indicate that the variance(s) should be modified or terminated, the Department will initiate rulemaking to do so.

3.2 Individual Variance Effluent Limits/Alternate Interim Requirements

Based on which May Result from Site-specific Water Quality Modeling

Generally, the interim effluent limits/requirements in any variance, general or individual, will be based on achieving the highest attainable condition within the receiving water. In some cases a permittee may be able to demonstrate, using water quality modeling and reach-specific data, that greater emphasis on reducing one nutrient (target nutrient) will achieve the highest attainable condition, since it would produce comparable/equivalent/similar water quality and biological conditions in the receiving water as ~~could~~ be achieved by emphasizing the reduction of both nutrients (i.e., both nitrogen and phosphorus). Requiring such a permittee to immediately install sophisticated nutrient-removal technologies to reduce the non-target nutrient to levels as stringent as what is in statute at §75-5-313(5)(b), MCA, (or future Department updates) would not be the most prudent nutrient control expenditure, and could cause the discharger to incur unnecessary economic expense. In such a case, the interim/requirements effluent limits for the individual discharger may be adjusted to reflect greater emphasis on controlling one of the parameters, so long as the highest attainable condition is maintained within the receiving water. The permittee will be required to submit the demonstration with the proposed alternate interim effluent limits to the Department for review and .In addition, the permittee will be required to provide monitoring water- quality data that can be used to determine if the justifications for the alternate less stringent interim effluent limits continue to hold true (i.e., status monitoring). Because status can change, for example due to substantive nonpoint source cleanups upstream of the discharger, status monitoring by the discharger is required.

The nutrient concentrations identified via this alternate interim requirement modeling may eventually be adopted as site-specific standards under the Board of Environmental Review's rulemaking authority in §75-5-301(2), MCA, but would require an analysis of their downstream effects prior to adoption.

~~If the permittee cannot meet them, Requiring a the point source discharger to immediately install sophisticated nutrient removal technologies to reduce the non-target nutrient to levels more as stringent than as what is in statute at §75-5-313(5)(b), MCA (or future Department updates) may not be the most prudent nutrient control expenditure, and would cause the discharger to incur unnecessary economic expense. Since this relates to economic impacts, as described at §75-5-313(1), MCA, these situations are appropriately addressed by individual variances. If such a case can be demonstrated to the satisfaction of the Department, then a permittee can apply for an individual variance which will include discharger specific limits reflecting the highest attainable condition for the receiving water rather than limits based on any updated general variance concentration. The demonstration must include effects on the downstream waterbody including effects from the non-target nutrient; if the downstream waterbody will be impacted, some level of reduction on the target and/or non-target nutrient will likely be required or the individual variance will not be granted~~

4.0 Endnotes

(1) Based on facility design flow.

(2) ~~Falk, M.W., J.B. Neethling, and D.J. Reardon, 2011. Striking a Balance between Wastewater Treatment Nutrient Removal and Sustainability. Water Environment Research Foundation, document NUTR1R06n, IWA Publishing, London, UK.~~

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