

#### FAQ'S

## WHAT IS SELENIUM?

Selenium (Se) is a naturally occurring element that is present in sedimentary rocks, shales, coal, and phosphate deposits and soils. Selenium is a micro nutrient, essential for biological processes to occur for humans and animals. Although selenium is essential micro nutrient, it can become toxic at concentrations just above what is nutritionally required.

## WHAT IS THE EFFECT ON FISH?

The toxicological effects of selenium are most commonly observed at the reproductive level for fish. Some examples of this are reduced viable egg production and reduced growth or survival of fry. This can lead to eventual population declines.

## WHAT IS A SITE-SPECIFIC STANDARD?

Site-specific water quality standards are derived using data from a specific waterbody or region. In this case, Lake Koocanusa. EPA acknowledges in their 2016 Se criteria that the way selenium bioaccumulates and moves up the food chain is very dependent on site-specific conditions. Therefore, EPA provided guidance for the development of site-specific selenium standards which DEQ followed for Lake Koocanusa.

## SELENIUM STANDARDS

In 2020, Montana adopted updated selenium standards for Lake Koocanusa and the Kootenai River in northwest Montana. The standards were developed in accordance with the 2016 EPA national criteria and are fish tissue based to account for dietary exposure of selenium.

**Table 1.** Selenium standards for Lake Koocanusa and the Kootenai River.

Selenium Standards	Lake Koocanusa	Kootenai River
Dissolved selenium (µg/L)	0.8	3.1
Egg/ovary (mg/kg dw)	15.1	15.1
Muscle (mg/kg dw)	11.3	11.3
Whole body (mg/kg dw)	8.5	8.5

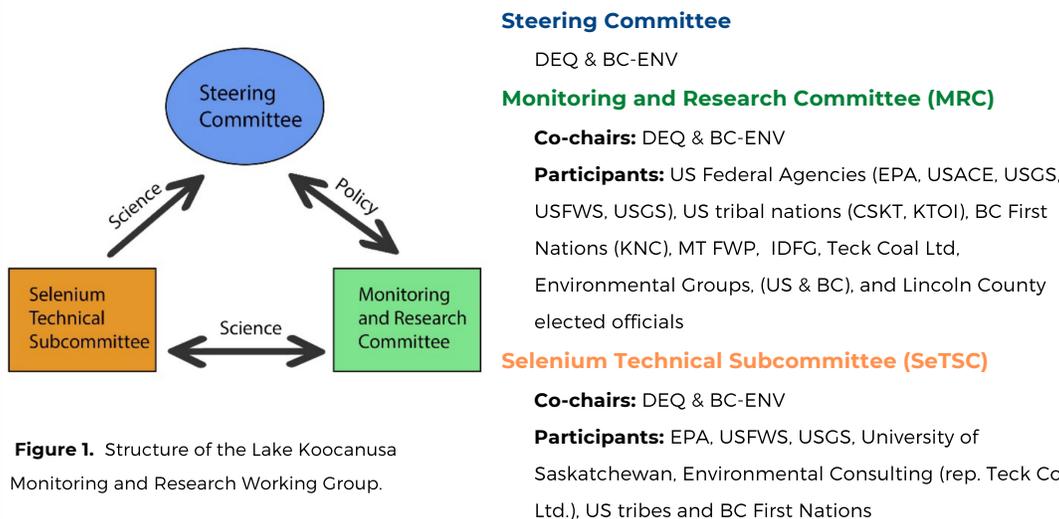
## A MULTI-YEAR LONG PROCESS

2010	2012	2013	2014 & 2015	2016	2015-2020
<b>MOUC- Flathead Valley</b>	<b>Koocanusa listed as threatened for selenium</b>	<b>BC Ministerial Order</b>	<b>Lake Koocanusa Monitoring and Research Working Group (LKMRG)</b>	<b>EPA updates national selenium criteria</b>	<b>MT &amp; BC collaborative selenium standard development</b>
Coordinated efforts began between BC & MT to address transboundary water quality		Remediate water quality effects of past BC mining activities and guide environmental management of future mining activities in the Elk Valley, including Lake Koocanusa	Bi-national working group established with selenium determined to be top priority  Selenium Technical Subcommittee established	Updated national criteria are fish tissue based to account for dietary exposure as the predominate selenium pathway in aquatic systems	MT rulemaking September-December, 2020

## BI-NATIONAL COORDINATION

DEQ has maintained an innovative collaboration with the British Columbia Ministry of Environment & Climate Change Strategy (BC-ENV) to address rising selenium levels in Lake Koocanusa. In 2015 the group determined selenium to be the top priority and subsequently formed the Selenium Technical Subcommittee (SeTSC) to guide the selenium work. The SeTSC is comprised of leading experts in selenium from across the US and Canada.

### Lake Koocanusa Monitoring & Research Working Group



**Figure 1.** Structure of the Lake Koocanusa Monitoring and Research Working Group.

FAQ'S

## WHAT FISH ARE SENSITIVE?

White sturgeon, listed as an Endangered Species, is the known most sensitive species to selenium and is found in the Kootenai River. Rainbow and westslope cutthroat trout are among the species with greater sensitivity. Burbot, cyprinids, and sucker species are also species of concern in Lake Koocanusa.

## WHAT MODEL WAS USED?

DEQ used the same model that EPA used for the development of the nationally recommended selenium criteria but included site-specific data. It is a selenium bioaccumulation model that accounts for dietary exposure of selenium. The peer-reviewed model by Presser and Luomoa (2010) is recognized as the state of the science for selenium bioaccumulation modeling.

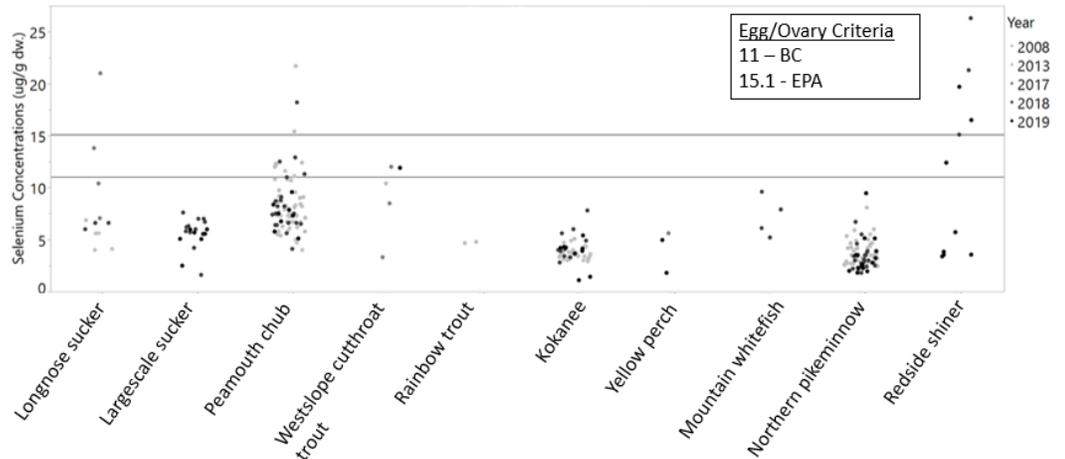
## WHY 0.8 VS. 1.5?

The modeling results showed that 15% of conditions in Lake Koocanusa would be protected by a standard of 1.5 µg/L which is not protective of aquatic life. The 0.8 µg/L was developed following guidance by leading selenium experts and is protective of approximately 75% of conditions in the reservoir, which is protective of the aquatic life.

## FISH TISSUE DATA

Since 2008, Fish Wildlife and Parks (FWP) and DEQ have been working collaboratively to collect fish tissue samples in Lake Koocanusa for selenium analysis. Egg/ovary tissue is the most indicative of toxicological effects of selenium. Montana adopted EPA's recommended egg/ovary recommended criteria of 15.1 mg/kg dry weight (dw).

At current water column concentrations at approximately 1 µg/L on average, some species have egg/ovary selenium concentrations above 15.1 mg/kg dw. Therefore, the water column concentrations must be lower to bring the fish concentrations of all species below the standard.

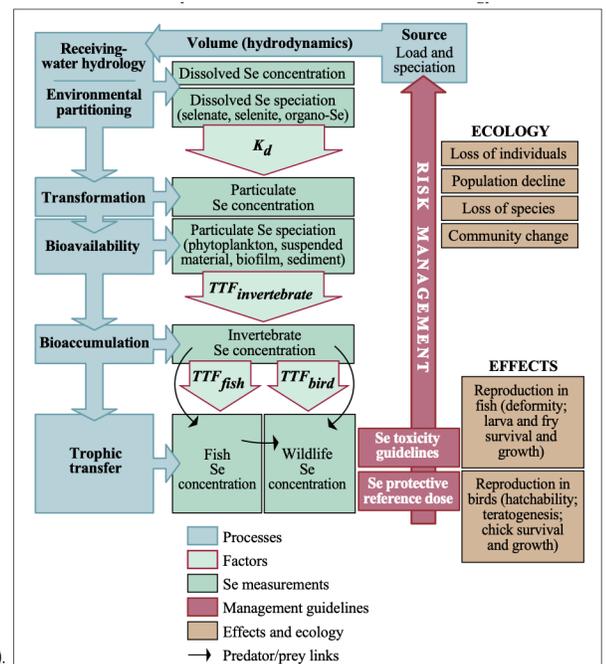


**Table 2.** Fish reproductive tissue (egg/ovary) data in the Montana portion of Lake Koocanusa. The shaded points represent years (2008-2019). The lower horizontal line represents the British Columbia egg/ovary guideline of 11 mg/kg dw and the upper horizontal line represents the EPA recommended egg/ovary criteria of 15.1 mg/kg. Figure by EPA R8.

## SELENIUM MODELING

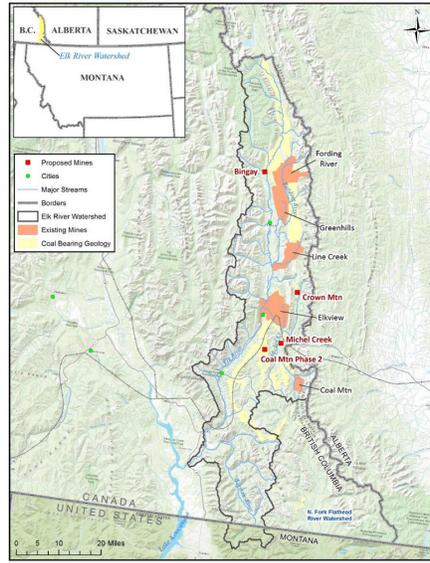
DEQ partnered with the United States Geological Survey (USGS) to utilize the EPA recommended Presser and Luoma (2010) bioaccumulation modeling for developing a site-specific water column standard for Lake Koocanusa. Modeling conclusions were released as part of peer-reviewed work by Presser and Naftz (2020) including a report and data release. The report provided the foundation from which DEQ developed a protective water column standard in coordination with British Columbia and the SeTSC, comprised of Se experts.

**Figure 3.** Conceptual illustration of the Selenium Ecosystem Scale Model (Presser and Luoma, 2010).

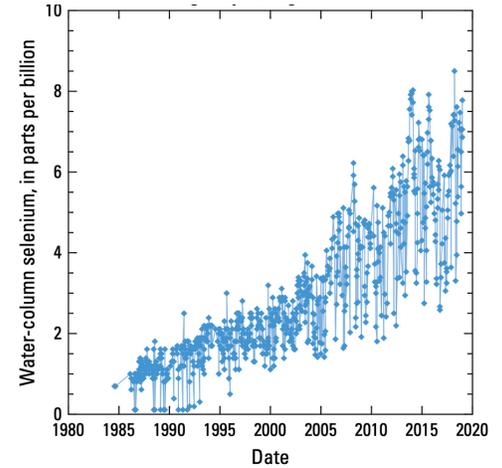


## SELENIUM SOURCE

The source of elevated selenium in Lake Kooconusa originates from the Elk Valley, British Columbia (BC). The selenium is leached from vast overburden piles, a by-product of historic and present day mining operations into nearby surface and groundwater. Selenium concentrations have been recorded at a Canadian Federal long-term monitoring station located just upstream of the confluence of the Elk River and Kootenay River, BC. This monitoring station shows increasing levels of selenium over time.

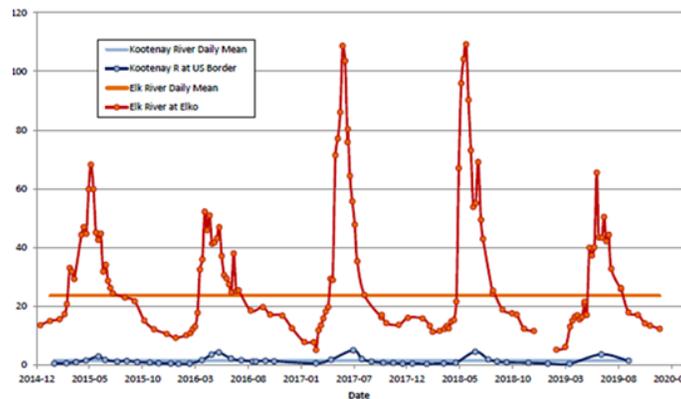


**Figure 5.** Lake Kooconusa and the Kootenai/Kootenay River Basin. Orange areas represent existing coal mine operations (USGS, 2017).



**Figure 4.** Water column concentrations for the Elk River at Highway 93, August 1984 to January 2019 (USGS, 2020).

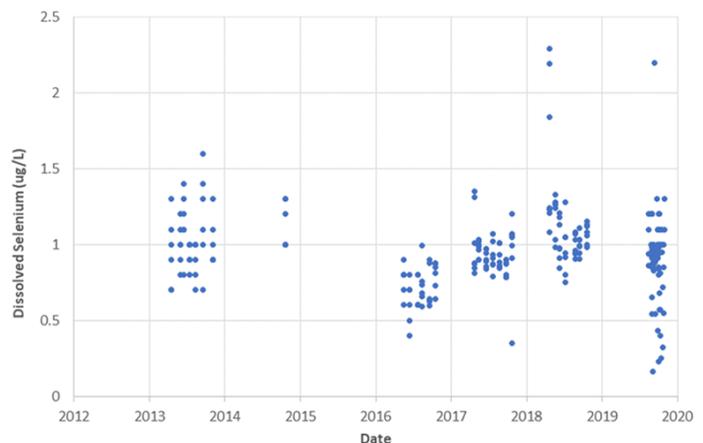
MacDonald (2009) calculated selenium loadings to Lake Kooconusa and concluded that approximately 95% of selenium loads come from the Elk River with minimal contributions from the Kootenay and Bull River.



**Figure 6.** Calculated selenium loadings to Lake Kooconusa from the Kootenay and Elk Rivers. The red line represents Elk River and blue line represents Kootenay River. The values were calculated by BC-ENV and incorporate scaled flow values and do include some uncertainty and are not direct measurements of load or water quality and quantity. Figure provided by BC-ENV.

## MONTANA WATER DATA

While Se water quality data has been sampled since the 1980s in BC (Figure 4) it has only been sampled in the Montana portion of Lake Kooconusa since 2013. Current water quality sampling is conducted in partnership with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Geological Survey. On average, the current dissolved Se concentration is approximately 1 µg/L.



**Figure 7.** Dissolved selenium concentrations in Lake Kooconusa, MT. Figure provided by EPA Region 8.

## A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

### **Lake Kooconusa Monitoring and Research Working Group**

A transparent collaborative effort with bi-national, multi-stakeholder input on selenium standard development since 2015.

### **Technical**

Selenium Technical Subcommittee comprised of leading selenium experts held over 30 meetings. Multi year data collection. Modeling completion. Multiple technical reports were completed including, two USGS reports and a data release, a DEQ technical support document, and a State of the Lake report and data compilation. All reports and data releases are publicly available.

### **Public Outreach**

Extensive public outreach beginning in 2015 has included numerous public presentations and panels, access to technical meetings, fact sheets, and a public website.

### **Montana Administrative Procedures Act (MAPA)**

DEQ has met all the requirements of MAPA, which has included Water Pollution Control Advisory Council (WPCAC), the Board of Environmental Review (BER), noticed through the Montana Administrative Record (MAR) and newspapers, and a robust public comment period.

### **Legislative**

Presentations, updates, and timelines provided to both the Environmental Quality Council (EQC) and the Water Policy Interim Committee (WPIC).

### **Next Steps**

DEQ continues to collaborate with partners on monitoring selenium in Lake Kooconusa and the Kootenai River. DEQ continues to work with BC and participate in the Lake Kooconusa Monitoring and Research Working Group.

---

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

### **DEQ Standards & Modeling**

<https://deq.mt.gov/water/Surfacewater/standards>

### **Public Wiki housing meeting minutes, presentations, data, reports, and more**

<http://lakekooconusaconservation.pbworks.com/w/page/100633354/FrontPage>

### **USGS Selenium Lake Kooconusa**

[https://www.usgs.gov/centers/wy-mt-water/science/lake-kooconusa-water-quality?qt-science\\_center\\_objects=0#qt-science\\_center\\_objects](https://www.usgs.gov/centers/wy-mt-water/science/lake-kooconusa-water-quality?qt-science_center_objects=0#qt-science_center_objects)

---

## REFERENCES

McDonald, 2009. Survey of Selenium in Water, Zooplankton and Fish in Lake Kooconusa, British Columbia, prepared by Spirogyra Scientific Consulting for British Columbia Ministry of Environment on behalf of the Elk Valley Selenium Task Force, Cranbrook, British Columbia.

Presser, T.S., and Luoma, S.N., 2010. A methodology for ecosystem-scale modeling of selenium: Integrated Environmental Assessment and Management, v. 6, no. 4, p. 685-710.

USGS, 2017. Jenni, K.E., Naftz, D.L., and Presser, T.S., Conceptual Modeling Framework to Support Development of Site-Specific Selenium Criteria for Lake Kooconusa, Montana, U.S.A., and British Columbia Derivation of a Site-Specific Water Column Selenium Standard for Lake Kooconusa - Section 7.0 September 2020 FINAL 45 Columbia, Canada, U.S. Geological Survey Open-File Report 2017-1130. <https://doi.org/10.3133/ofr20171130>.

USGS, 2020. Presser, T.S., and Naftz, D.L. Understanding and documenting the scientific basis of selenium ecological protection in support of site-specific guidelines development for Lake Kooconusa, Montana, U.S.A., and British Columbia, Canada: U.S. Geological Survey Open-File Report 2020-1098, 40 p., <https://doi.org/10.3133/ofr20201098>.