

Turbidity as a Water Quality Standard for Salmonid Habitats in Alaska

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Abstract.—Evidence both of trophic level changes induced by reduction in light penetration and of more direct effects of sediment and turbidity on aquatic life indicates that turbidity constitutes a valid and useful water quality standard that can be used to protect aquatic habitats from sediment pollution. A review of studies conducted in Alaska and elsewhere indicated that water quality standards allowing increases of 25 or 5 nephelometric turbidity units above ambient turbidity in clear coldwater habitats provide moderate and relatively high protection, respectively, for salmonid fish resources in Alaska. Even stricter limits may be warranted to protect extremely clear waters, but such stringent limits apparently are not necessary to protect naturally turbid systems.

Turbidity has been described as a major water quality characteristic affecting freshwater fish communities (Judy et al. 1984), yet there has been little published literature expressly analyzing the use of specific turbidity criteria as water quality standards to protect aquatic habitats and fish from sediment pollution. In this paper, I review the available literature on turbidity in cold freshwater habitats beyond that discussed in Lloyd et al. (1987, this issue) and evaluate the efficacy of water quality standards that are based on specific turbidity criteria, particularly those currently used in Alaska. The justification and implementation of appropriate standards are important to protect fish resources from habitat degradation caused by this common form of pollution.

Turbidity is an optical property of water wherein suspended and some dissolved materials such as clay, silt, finely divided organic and inorganic matter, plankton, and other microscopic organisms cause light to be scattered and absorbed rather than transmitted in straight lines (APHA et al. 1980). Modern nephelometric techniques measure the scattering of light in a sample of water at an angle of 90° to the path of incident light; therefore absorption of light has little effect in more recent turbidity measures (Vanous et al. 1982). Measurements of turbidity have been developed to quickly estimate the amount of sediment within a sample of water (Truhlar 1976; Schroeder et al. 1981; Earhart 1984), and they are also used to describe the effect of suspended sediment in block-

ing the transmission of light through a body of water.

Effects of Turbidity and Suspended Sediment on Salmonids

An increase in turbidity has been shown to dramatically reduce light penetration in both lakes and streams in Alaska and elsewhere; it is associated with decreased production and abundance of plant material (primary production), decreased abundance of fish food organisms (secondary production), and decreased production and abundance of fish (Lloyd et al. 1987). There also are definable relations between turbidity and the concentration of suspended sediments (Lloyd et al. 1987) that enable turbidity to be used as a reasonable estimator of suspended sediment concentration (SSC). These relationships can be important tools given that high SSC has been directly related to adverse impacts on aquatic systems beyond those directly attributable to turbidity.

In addition to the studies conducted in Alaska, there is a large, albeit disjointed, body of literature on the effects of turbidity and suspended sediments. Reviews of much of this literature have been provided by Hollis et al. (1964), Sherk (1971), Sorensen et al. (1977), Stern and Stickle (1978), Farnworth et al. (1979), Muncy et al. (1979), and Wilber (1983). In an often-cited study, Wallen (1951) reported that lethal levels of turbidity, then expressed in parts per million, range in the 10s to 100s of thousands of parts per million (ppm). These high levels of turbidity required to kill fish led Wallen (1951) to conclude that natural turbidity does not represent a lethal threat to fish. Wallen's information, however, was developed primarily from tests of acute effects on warmwater fishes and

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likely is not applicable to the coldwater salmonids prevalent in Alaska, other western and northern states, and Canadian provinces. Moreover, a study on largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*) and green sunfish (*Lepomis cyanellus*) contained data that indicated lower levels of turbidity such as 4–16 Jackson turbidity units (JTU) can alter fish behavior (Heimstra et al. 1969). Also, relatively low turbidity can reduce the feeding efficiency of bluegills (*Lepomis macrochirus*; Vinyard and O'Brien 1976; Gardner 1981).

Relatively low turbidity or SSC may either stress these fish, alter their behavior patterns, or kill them. Lloyd et al. (1987) described impacts observed in Alaska, and a summary of relevant literature from studies conducted outside Alaska on the direct effects of turbidity or sediments measured as suspended material on salmonid fishes is presented in Table 1. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that even low turbidities near 10–25 nephelometric turbidity units (NTU), and suspended sediment concentrations near 35 ppm can have deleterious effects on fish (Bachmann 1958; Olson et al. 1973; Smith and Sykora 1976; Berg 1982; Bachman 1984; Sigler et al. 1984; Berg and Northcote 1985).

The European Inland Fisheries Advisory Commission (EIFAC 1964) concluded that waters containing 0–25 ppm chemically inert solids should not adversely affect freshwater fisheries, but that an SSC of 25–80 ppm may lower the production of fish; waters containing an SSC above 80 ppm are unlikely to support good fisheries. Moreover, the commission emphasized that “the spawning grounds of salmon and trout require special consideration and should be kept as free as possible from finely divided sediments.” Gammon (1970), in a report to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on stream studies conducted in Indiana, stated that the suspended solids criteria proposed by EIFAC may be too liberal for fish populations in the United States.

A turbidity level of 10 NTUs can cause significant declines in feeding rate, food assimilation, and reproductive potential of *Daphnia pulex* (McCabe and O'Brien 1983). Robinson (1957) found that reproduction of cladocerans was reduced at clay and charcoal concentrations of 82–392 ppm. Arruda et al. (1983) observed that suspended sediment concentrations of 50–100 mg/L reduced the algal carbon ingested by cladocerans to potential starvation levels. Cladocerans constitute an important food item for salmonid fishes and effects on these zooplankton can translate to reduced food availability or quality for fish.

Water Quality Standards in Alaska

Water quality standards impose limits on allowable, human-induced alterations of natural waters. These limits are specified for various characteristics with respect to the designated use or classification of a particular body of water. Most of Alaska's fresh waters have been classified as suitable for drinking water supply and other consumptive uses. The receiving water standard for turbidity in waters suitable for drinking water supply states that waters:

Shall not exceed 5 NTU above natural conditions when the natural turbidity is 50 NTU or less, and not have more than 10% increase in turbidity when the natural condition is more than 50 NTU, not to exceed a maximum increase of 25 NTU [AAC 1985].

Although few, if any, waters in Alaska are designated only for use by fish and wildlife because of their already more restrictive classification for drinking water supply, Alaska's water quality standards do contain a separate standard for waters classified for the growth and propagation of fish, shellfish, other aquatic life, and wildlife, including waterfowl and furbearers. In receiving waters, streams:

Shall not exceed 25 NTU above natural condition level. For all lake waters, shall not exceed 5 NTU over natural conditions [AAC 1985].

For simplicity in considering allowable increases of turbidity in clearwater systems, we can restate the above standards: for drinking water, no more than 5 NTU above natural; for fish and wildlife, no more than 25 NTU above natural in streams and no more than 5 NTU above natural in lakes.

Alaska has no numerical standard for SSC in drinking water supplies, but the state does have a generic, narrative standard for sediment.

No measurable increase in concentrations of sediment, including settleable solids, above natural levels. [AAC 1985.]

The sediment standard for the propagation of fish and wildlife is much more complex and difficult to enforce.

The percent accumulation of fine sediment in the range of 0.1 mm to 4.0 mm in the gravel bed of waters utilized by anadromous or resident fish for spawning may not be increased more than 5% by weight over natural condition (as shown from grain size accumulation graph). In no case may the 0.1 mm to 4.0 mm fine sediment range in the gravel bed of waters utilized by anadromous or resident fish for spawning exceed a maximum of 30% by weight (as shown from grain size accumulation graph). . . . In all other surface waters

TABLE 1.—Some reported effects of turbidity and suspended sediment concentrations on salmonids outside Alaska.

Effect	Species ^a (life stage)	Location	Reported turbidity ^b or suspended sedi- ment concentration	Reference
Fatal (96-h LC ₅₀)	Coho salmon (juveniles)	Washington	1,200 mg/L	Noggle (1978)
Fatal (96-h LC ₅₀)	Coho salmon (juveniles)	Washington	509; 1,217 mg/L	Stober et al. (1981)
Fatal (96-h LC ₅₀)	Chinook salmon (juveniles)	Washington	488 mg/L	Stober et al. (1981)
Reduced survival (marked)	Chum salmon (eggs)	British Columbia	97 mg/L	Langer (1980)
Reduced survival (marked)	Rainbow trout (eggs)	Great Britain	110 mg/L	Scullion and Edwards (1980)
Reduced survival (marked)	Rainbow trout (eggs)	Oregon	1,000–2,500 ppm	Campbell (1954)
Reduced survival (marked)	Rainbow trout (juveniles)	Great Britain	270 ppm	Herbert and Merkens (1961)
Reduced survival (marked)	Rainbow trout (juveniles)	Great Britain	200 ppm	Herbert and Richards (1963)
Reduced survival (marked)	Rainbow trout (juveniles)	Oregon	1,000–2,500 ppm	Campbell (1954)
Reduced survival (slight)	Rainbow trout (juveniles)	Great Britain	90 ppm	Herbert and Merkens (1961)
Reduced survival (marked)	Coho salmon (juveniles)	Pennsylvania	6; 12 mg Fe/L (15–27 JTU)	Smith and Sykora (1976)
Reduced survival (marked)	Coho salmon (adults)	Washington	1,400–1,600 mg/L	Stober et al. (1981)
Reduced abundance (marked)	Brown trout	Great Britain	1,000; 6,000 ppm	Herbert et al. (1961)
Reduced abundance (marked)	Lake trout	Northwest Territories	<10 FTU	McCart et al. (1980)
Reduced growth (marked)	Brook trout (juveniles)	Pennsylvania	50 mg Fe/L (86 JTU)	Sykora et al. (1972)
Reduced growth (slight)	Brook trout (juveniles)	Pennsylvania	12 mg Fe/L (32 JTU)	Sykora et al. (1972)
Reduced growth (slight)	Rainbow trout (juveniles)	Great Britain	50 ppm	Herbert and Richards (1963)
Reduced growth	Coho salmon (juveniles)	Idaho	25 NTU	Sigler et al. (1984)
Reduced growth (marked)	Arctic grayling (juveniles)	Yukon	1,000 mg/L	McLeay et al. (1984)
Reduced growth (slight)	Arctic grayling (juveniles)	Yukon	100; 300 mg/L	McLeay et al. (1984)
Reduced food conversion	Rainbow trout (juveniles)	Arizona	<70 JTU	Olson et al. (1973)
Reduced feeding (cessation)	Coho salmon (juveniles)	Washington	300 mg/L	Noggle (1978)
Reduced feeding	Coho salmon (juveniles)	Washington	100 mg/L	Noggle (1978)
Reduced feeding	Coho salmon (juveniles)	British Columbia	10–60 NTU	Berg (1982), Berg and Northcote (1985)
Reduced feeding (cessation)	Cutthroat trout	Idaho	35 ppm	Bachmann (1958)
Reduced feeding (cessation)	Brown trout	Pennsylvania	7.5 NTU	Bachman (1984)
Reduced feeding	Rainbow trout (juveniles)	Arizona	70 JTU	Olson et al. (1973)
Reduced feeding	Arctic grayling (juveniles)	Yukon	100; 300; 1,000 mg/L	McLeay et al. (1984)
Reduced condition factor	Rainbow trout (juveniles)	Great Britain	110 mg/L	Scullion and Edwards (1980)
Altered diet (terrestrial instead of aquatic)	Rainbow trout (juveniles)	Great Britain	110 mg/L	Scullion and Edwards (1980)

TABLE 1.—Continued.

Effect	Species ^a (life stage)	Location	Reported turbidity ^b or suspended sedi- ment concentration	Reference
Stress (increased plasma cortisol, hematocrit, and suscepti- bility to pathogens)	Coho salmon (juveniles)	Oregon	500 mg/L	Redding and Schreck (1980)
	Steelhead (juveniles)		2,000 mg/L	
Stress (increased metabolic rate, susceptibility to toxicants)	Arctic grayling (juveniles)	Yukon	300 mg/L	McLeay et al. (1984)
Stress (increased plasma glucose)	Arctic grayling (juveniles)	Yukon	50 mg/L	McLeay et al. (1983)
Stress (respiratory distress)	Coho salmon (juveniles)	Pennsylvania	6; 12 mg Fe/L (15–27 JTU)	Smith and Sykora (1976)
Stress (increased ventilation)	Brook trout (juveniles)	Lake Superior	231 NTU	Carlson (1984)
Disease (fin rot)	Rainbow trout (juveniles)	Great Britain	270 ppm	Herbert and Merkens (1961)
Disease (fin rot)	Rainbow trout (juveniles)	Great Britain	100; 200 ppm	Herbert and Merkens (1961)
Avoidance	Chinook salmon (adults)	California	“Natural turbidity”	Sumner and Smith (1940)
Avoidance	Chinook salmon (adults)	Washington	650 mg/L	Whitman et al. (1982)
Avoidance	Chinook salmon (adults)	Washington	350 mg/L	Brannon et al. (1981)
Avoidance (sensitivity)	Lake trout	Lake Superior	6 FTU	Swenson (1978)
Avoidance	Coho salmon (juveniles)	Washington	70 NTU	Bisson and Bilby (1982)
Avoidance	Coho salmon, steelhead (juveniles)	Idaho	22–265 NTU	Sigler (1980), Sigler et al. (1984)
Displacement	Coho salmon, steelhead (juveniles)	Idaho	40–50 NTU	Sigler (1980)
Displacement	Arctic grayling (juveniles)	Yukon	300; 1,000 mg/L	McLeay et al. (1984)
Displacement	Rainbow trout (juveniles)	Great Britain	110 mg/L	Scullion and Edwards (1980)
Altered behavior (feeding)	Trout	c	25 JTU	Langer (1980)
Altered behavior (less use of overhead cover)	Brook trout	Wisconsin	7 FTU	Gradall and Swenson (1982)
Altered behavior (visual)	c	c	25–30 JTU	Bell (1984)
Altered behavior (visual)	Coho salmon (juveniles)	British Columbia	10–60 NTU	Berg (1982), Berg and Northcote (1985)
Altered behavior (loss of territoriality)	Coho salmon (juveniles)	British Columbia	10–60 NTU	Berg (1982), Berg and Northcote (1985)
Altered behavior (listlessness)	Coho salmon (juveniles)	Pennsylvania	6; 12 mg Fe/L (15–27 JTU)	Smith and Sykora (1976)
Change in body color	Arctic grayling (juveniles)	Yukon	300; 1,000 mg/L	McLeay et al. (1984)
Change in body color	Coho salmon (juveniles)	Pennsylvania	6; 12 mg Fe/L (15–27 JTU)	Smith and Sykora (1976)
Reduced tolerance to saltwater	Chinook salmon (juveniles)	Washington	3,109 mg/L	Stober et al. (1981)

^a Arctic grayling (*Thymallus arcticus*)Brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*)Brown trout (*Salmo trutta*)Chinook salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*)Chum salmon (*Oncorhynchus keta*)Coho salmon (*Oncorhynchus kisutch*)Cutthroat trout (*Salmo clarki*)Lake trout (*Salvelinus namaycush*)Rainbow trout (*Salmo gairdneri*)Steelhead (anadromous *S. gairdneri*)^b Formazin (FTU), Jackson (JTU), and
nephelometric (NTU) turbidity units.^c Information not available.

TABLE 2.—Numerical turbidity standards for protection of fish and wildlife aquatic habitats in Alaska and other states (ADEC 1978; API 1980).

State	Turbidity (NTU or JTU) ^a
Alaska	25 units above natural in streams 5 units above natural in lakes
California	20% above natural, not to exceed 10 units above natural
Idaho	5 units above natural
Minnesota	10 units
Montana	10 units (5 above natural) ^b
Oregon	10% above natural
Vermont	10 units (cold water)
Washington	25 units above natural (5 and 10 above natural) ^c
Wyoming	10 units above natural

^a Nephelometric (NTU) and Jackson (JTU) turbidity units are roughly equivalent (USEPA 1983).

^b Montana places the more stringent limit on waters containing salmonid fishes.

^c API (1980) reports different values in Washington for "excellent" and "good" classes of water.

no sediment loads (suspended or deposited) which can cause adverse effects on aquatic animal or plant life, their reproduction or habitat. [AAC 1985.]

By definition, turbidity and SSC are closely intertwined. Information summarized by Lloyd et al. (1987) indicated that a turbidity standard can be used to address the effects of turbidity as an optical property of water and as an indicator of SSC. The effects of sedimentation on lake and stream bottoms could then be addressed by separate, enforceable settleable solids or streambed standards. Regardless of whether such changes are made to water quality standards for sediment, there is still a need to establish or reaffirm the levels of turbidity, and consequently SSC, that are appropriate as standards for regulating human-induced impacts on aquatic systems.

Light Penetration and Productivity

An acceptable turbidity standard must do two things to protect aquatic habitats: (1) prevent a loss of aquatic productivity and (2) cause no lethal or chronic sublethal effects on fish and wildlife. With reference to Alaska's current standard for the propagation of fish and wildlife, a 5-NTU increase in turbidity in a clear-water lake may reduce the productive volume of that lake by about 80%, and a 25-NTU increase in a clear-water stream 0.5 m deep may reduce plant production by about 50% (Lloyd et al. 1987). This standard for protection of fish and wildlife in streams is more lenient than the 10-JTU criterion previously recommended by the U.S. Federal Water Pollution

Control Administration (USFWPCA 1968). Turbidity standards used in Alaska and in other western and northern states indicate that Alaska currently allows liberal increases of turbidity over natural conditions in streams (Table 2). It is interesting to note, however, that a recent telephone survey of state and provincial agencies of the United States and Canada indicated that no adequate justification has yet been developed for these standards outside of Alaska (Peterson et al. 1985).

Alaska's current drinking water standard of 5 NTUs above ambient levels in clear-water lakes and streams also may allow a reduction of primary plant production—but not to the extent that the 25-NTUs-over-ambient standard for fish and wildlife would allow in streams. For comparison, a 5-NTU increase in turbidity in a clear stream 0.5 m deep may reduce primary production by 13% or more, depending on stream depth (Lloyd et al. 1987).

Absolute turbidities of 4–8 NTUs and above may hamper the efficient management of fisheries in Alaska because aerial observers cannot see into the streams and estimate returns of adult salmon, and absolute turbidities of 8 NTUs and higher have been shown to reduce sport fishing in fish-bearing waters in Alaska (Lloyd et al. 1987). The Alaska Interagency Placer Mining Guidelines (ADEC et al. 1984) use turbidity of 3 NTUs or less as a criterion for establishing "high priority" streams. Application of a 5-NTUs-above-ambient standard would bring total turbidities in these streams to 8 NTUs, the level at which recreational fishing may decline, and at or near the level at which efficiency of aerial surveys of spawning salmon may be affected.

Suspended Sediment

There is evidence that high SSC is lethal to fish, and that somewhat lower levels of SSC and turbidity cause chronic, sublethal effects such as loss or reduction of sight-feeding capabilities, reduced growth, increased stress, and interference with environmental cues necessary for orientation in migrations (Table 1). Furthermore, suspended sediment may facilitate the transport of heavy metals and other pollutants (LaPerriere et al. 1985).

Several organizations have made recommendations for appropriate SSC in fish-bearing waters. By use of equation (9), $T = 0.44(SSL)^{0.858}$, of Lloyd et al. (1987), which relates turbidity (T) to suspended sediment concentration (SSL) in waters throughout Alaska, these recommendations can be translated into approximate turbidity criteria (Ta-

TABLE 3.—Recommended levels of suspended sediment concentration for the protection of fish habitat and translation of those levels to turbidity values for Alaskan waters. (NTU = nephelometric turbidity units.)

Reference	Level of protection from suspended sediment	Recommended suspended sediment concentration limitation (mg/L)	Translated maximum turbidity level state-wide ^a (NTU)	Translated maximum turbidity level for interior Alaska ^b (NTU)
EIFAC (1964)	High	0-25	7	25
Alabaster (1972)	Moderate	26-80	19	77
NAS and NAE (1973)	High	0-25	7	25
	Moderate	26-80	19	77
Alabaster and Lloyd (1980)	High	0-25	7	25
	Moderate	26-80	19	77
Newport and Moyer (1974)	High	0-25	7	25
	Moderate	26-100	23	95
Wilber (1969, 1983)	High	0-30	8	30
	Moderate	30-85	20	81
Hill (1974)	High	0-10	3	10
DFO (1983)	High	0	0	0
	Moderate	1-100	23	95

^a Derived from equation (9) in Lloyd et al. (1987).

^b Derived from equation (12) in Lloyd et al. (1987).

ble 3). Recommendations for a “moderate” level of protection (SSC up to 100 mg/L) roughly translate into turbidity values of up to 23 NTUs, close to Alaska’s current standard of 25 NTUs above natural conditions for the protection of fish and wildlife. Recommendations for a “high” level of protection (0-25 mg/L) roughly translate into turbidity values ranging up to 7 NTUs, approximating Alaska’s drinking water standard of 5 NTUs above natural conditions. Application of the present drinking water standard to waters in Alaska would conform to a consensus view of a “high” level of protection for fish from suspended sediments.

By use of equation (12), $T = 1.103(\text{SSC})^{0.968}$, from Lloyd et al. (1987) for interior Alaskan streams, “moderate” and “high” levels of protection from suspended sediment would translate into the higher turbidities of 95 and 25 NTUs, respectively (see Table 3), but these turbidities are too high to prevent light extinction and the accompanying decrease in the production of plants, fish food, and fish. Moreover, these higher turbidities could be expected to interfere with sight feeding of fish, angler success, and aerial escapement surveys.

Limitations to Existing Information

Assumptions made about the importance of aquatic primary production in streams may not be completely applicable to vegetated watersheds which likely rely more heavily upon organic ma-

terial derived from terrestrial sources (Chapman and Demory 1963; Chapman 1966). In addition, little work has been performed on the capacity of compensatory mechanisms to increase photosynthetic efficiency under low-light or turbid conditions (McIntire 1973; Hecky 1984; Hecky and Guildford 1984; Van Nieuwenhuyse and La-Perriere 1986), on the effect of organic staining of water on light penetration and turbidity (Brezonik 1978; Witte et al. 1982), or on the influence of increased or depressed nutrient concentrations caused by the same sediments that decrease light availability (Tilzer et al. 1976; Jackson and Hecky 1980).

Current information on relationships between turbidity and suspended sediment concentration is understandably tentative for at least four reasons.

(1) It is well known that the amount of turbidity produced per unit of suspended sediment concentration depends on sediment particle size, shape or angularity, and refractive index. Furthermore, these relationships will change with changes in hydrologic or hydraulic conditions as well as with differences in the geologic composition of the sediment source (Duchrow and Everhart 1971; Kunckle and Comer 1971; Beschta 1980; Milhous 1982).

(2) Measurements of turbidity may include some settleable solids, depending on the amount of settling that takes place before the sample is taken (Duchrow and Everhart 1971). Moreover, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish adverse im-

pacts to aquatic habitats caused by suspended materials from those caused by settleable materials.

(3) As illustrated in a recent study on placer-mined streams in interior Alaska by Toland (1984), the relationship between turbidity and SSC may change along a downstream gradient from a sediment source. Specifically, Toland found that, within the first 24 km downstream from placer-mine discharges on the Chatanika River, each 1 mg/L of suspended sediment produced less than 1 NTU of turbidity but, at points further downstream, each 1 mg/L of suspended sediment produced more than 1 NTU of turbidity (within the range of 10–150 units each for NTU and mg/L). This observation follows the intuitive notion that larger particles, which generally produce less turbidity per unit concentration than smaller particles, gradually settle out, thus shifting the turbidity versus SSC relationship to a higher NTU per unit SSC in reaches progressively further downstream (Ritter and Brown 1971).

(4) Depending on geomorphic, hydrologic, and hydraulic factors, different streams are able to accommodate different levels of sediment input and may naturally support different biotic communities.

Different species and even different life stages of species are susceptible to adverse effects from different levels of sediment and to sediments of different sizes. Salmonids are generally more susceptible to acute and chronic effects of sediment than are many species of warmwater fishes; however, even among salmonids some species may be more sensitive than others, and the sensitivity of their eggs and juvenile stages seemingly exceeds that of adults.

Evaluation of Alternative Standards

Several authors have suggested the need for standards other than simple turbidity criteria to control pollution by sediment. Wilson (1957) proposed that turbidity standards be based on a percentage increase above normal low-flow conditions. Tarzwell (1957) recommended that turbidity standards be altered to state that some percentage of incident light at the surface be allowed to reach a specified depth, standardized to a time between 1100 and 1300 hours. The National Academy of Sciences and National Academy of Engineering (NAS and NAE 1973) recommended that the depth of light penetration not be decreased by more than 10%, and that suspended sediment concentrations be limited to specific values, as outlined for the National Academy of Sciences in Table 3.

Cairns (1968) recognized the value of more flexible approaches but suggested that truly responsive regulations must be developed on a drainage-by-drainage basis and should change with stream-flow and other temporal characteristics. A significant problem with this approach, however, is that implementation and enforcement of such standards would require enormous baseline studies and almost continuous surveillance and monitoring. There is a question whether such an approach is feasible in Alaska or elsewhere.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA 1976) recommended a joint standard for turbidity and solids.

Freshwater fish and other aquatic life: Settleable and suspended solids should not reduce the depth of the compensation point for photosynthetic activity by more than 10 percent from the seasonally established norm for aquatic life.

This standard suffers from several deficiencies. First, the standard does not consider impacts associated with sediment deposited on the bottom, even though it mentions settleable solids; second, in relation to the water column, the standard does not address specific levels of SSC and places a severe burden on regulatory agencies to define a “seasonally established norm” for the compensation point. Third, as emphasized by Thurston et al. (1979), compensation point is of little value in streams, particularly where the water is so clear and shallow that light naturally penetrates all the way to the bottom. Thurston et al. (1979) recommended that separate solids standards (mg/L) and turbidity standards (NTU) be developed, designed to facilitate ease of measurement.

Any alternative standards to turbidity should account for both major aspects of turbidity—the extinction of light and the presence of suspended sediment. Direct measurement of both of these characteristics is possible; however, it should be recognized that the measure of turbidity was developed to make such estimates easier. Light penetration can be measured in situ with portable photometers and extinction coefficients calculated with simple graphs or equations, but discrete samples cannot be removed and analyzed separately. Sediment concentration can be sampled in the field and measured gravimetrically in a laboratory, but filtering, drying, and weighing procedures are required.

Establishment of any alternative standards will require considerable research and justification, as well as regulatory support. It is premature to judge

whether such alternatives would provide more effective regulatory tools than those current turbidity standards now offer, particularly if it is considered that turbidity standards can be tiered or graded (if necessary) to ambient water quality conditions and the level of protection desired for a body of water.

Conclusions

The strength of turbidity standards lies in the easy measurement, from discrete water samples, of an estimator for both light penetration and suspended sediment concentration. Relationships between turbidity and light penetration appear to be accurate and consistent, and the occurrence of even low turbidity has demonstrable and dramatic effects on aquatic plant production. These relationships and effects result in decreased production of zooplankton and macroinvertebrates, decreased abundance and production of fish, reduced angler use and success, and decreased efficiency of some fish management techniques. Relationships between turbidity and concentrations of suspended sediment are much less exact and less consistent; however, low levels of turbidity appear to correspond to sediment concentrations that can adversely affect coldwater salmonids.

Turbidity criteria, then, constitute reasonable water quality standards. Although turbidity is not a direct measure of either light penetration (Phinney 1959; Austin 1974) or suspended sediment concentration (Pickering 1976), it has been shown to be a very useful indicator of these characteristics (Gibbs 1974; Ritter and Ott 1974). Use of turbidity standards in the regulation of water quality is justified much in the same way that the density of fecal coliform bacteria is widely used as a water quality standard indicating the possible presence and concentration of other harmful bacteria. Reasonable turbidity criteria that are established to protect aquatic habitats from decreased light penetration also protect them from high concentrations of suspended sediments and possibly heavy metals. Separate settleable solids or streambed standards could then be applied to protect aquatic habitats from the impacts of heavier sediments on benthic substrates.

On the basis of current information, the continued application of Alaska's present water quality standard for the propagation of fish and wildlife (25 NTUs above natural conditions in streams and 5 NTUs in lakes) can be expected to provide a moderate level of protection for clear coldwater habitats. A higher level of protection would re-

quire a more restrictive turbidity standard, perhaps similar to the one currently applied to drinking water in Alaska (5 NTUs above natural conditions in streams and lakes). Even stricter limits may be warranted to protect extremely clear waters, due to the dramatic initial impact of turbidity on light penetration (Lloyd et al. 1987). However, such stringent limits do not appear to be necessary to protect naturally turbid systems where it may be possible to establish tiered or graded standards based on ambient water quality.

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