



March 6, 2023

Administrator Michael Regan  
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency,  
EPA Docket Center,  
Office of Water Docket  
Mail Code 28221T  
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue NW,  
Washington, DC 20460

Re: Water Quality Standards Regulatory Revisions to Protect Tribal Reserved Rights: Docket ID No. EPA-HQ-OW-2021-0791.

Dear Administrator Regan,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments concerning the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) proposed revisions to the Federal Clean Water Act (CWA) water quality standards (WQS) regulation at 40 CFR Part 131 as outlined in the December 5, 2022 Federal Register Notice. The proposed revisions would determine how WQS must protect aquatic and aquatic dependent resources reserved to Tribes through treaties, statutes, executive orders, or other sources of Federal law.

My comments come with the preamble that I have worked very hard to develop a constructive relationship with the Tribes located in Wyoming and recognize their sovereignty. This relationship is largely based on the ability of the Tribes and my office to mutually engage in frank and open discussions, as opposed to unilateral policy mandates. The concerns I raise in these comments are meant to point out the way in which these proposed rules could be detrimental to Wyoming, not infringe on treaty rights.

The EPA claims, through authorities in the CWA, that it may require the states and their agencies to determine whether there are explicit or implicit Tribal reserved rights applicable to waters under their jurisdiction. Aspects of Tribal reserved rights, including the scope, quantification, historical use, and otherwise, are made up of an incomplete, and in many cases, unsettled web of authorities. However, one thing is for certain, that is the CWA does not provide the authority, nor is it the appropriate jurisdictional avenue, to determine the reserved rights of the Tribes.

First, I want to emphasize that the EPA *does not* have the authority to determine or define the scope, extent, purposes, or quantity of Tribal reserved water rights, under the CWA or otherwise. Several United States Supreme Court cases already provide binding guidance for determining and defining the scope, extent, purposes, or quantity of Tribal reserved water rights. *In re Gen. Adjudication of All Rts. to Use Water in the Big Horn River Sys.*, 753 P.2d 76, 94 (Wyo. 1988).

Under well-established federal law, only Congress possesses the authority to modify treaties and their rights. *McGirt v. Oklahoma*, 140 S.Ct. 2452, 2462 (2020). Crucially, there is little, if any, evidence that Congress intended to determine or define the scope, extent, purposes, or quantity of Tribal reserved water rights when it enacted the CWA. As a result, the EPA clearly acts “in excess of statutory jurisdiction, authority, or limitations, or short of statutory right” if it attempts to determine or define those rights in regulation, force states to determine or define those rights, or otherwise create, destroy, alter, expand, diminish, or affect any such rights. 5 U.S.C.A. § 706(2)(C).

Additionally, it is the exclusive province of courts, not regulatory agencies, to make final determinations on what the law is with regard to treaties. As stated by the United States Supreme Court, “[i]f treaties are to be given effect as federal law under our legal system, determining their meaning as a matter of federal law ‘is emphatically the province and duty of the judicial department,’ headed by the ‘one supreme Court’ established by the Constitution.” *Sanchez-Llamas v. Oregon*, 548 U.S. 331, 334 (2006). Consistent with this framework, the courts are the only bodies that can finally determine the meaning of treaties and, as such, the long line of binding court precedent regarding reserved treaty rights controls. The EPA cannot ignore the incredible width and breadth of case law interpreting and finally adjudicating Tribal reserved treaty rights, unilaterally taking power into their own hands to redefine, reinterpret, and redetermine Tribal treaty rights extrajudicially under the guise of regulating water quality standards.

Even where courts have not finally determined or defined Tribal reserved rights, implementation of WQS on unquantified rights cannot be acted upon under the CWA. With over a century of legal battles in the books dealing with ambiguities in treaties, court interpretations have not resolved the uncertainty of Tribal claims and Tribal reserved rights. The CWA’s WQS requirements cannot be imposed on unsettled rights and uses that are neither quantified nor agreed upon by courts or parties in the first place. Not only does the EPA lack the authority to adjudicate or decide Tribal reserved rights claims as necessary to implement any such WQS requirements, but the expertise and resources needed to make any such determinations are beyond the capability of both the EPA and state water quality agencies in their day-to-day activities.

Second, the EPA seems to have been purposefully vague when crafting the language around Tribal reserved rights in the proposed rules. For example, EPA’s definition of “tribal reserved rights” is ambiguous, impermissibly broad, and creates unnecessary uncertainty, potentially cross-pollinating several areas of Tribal law that are meant to be viewed distinctly in their own respective spheres. 87 Fed. Reg. 74361, 74363. The phrase “aquatic and aquatic dependent resources” could be construed to cover almost any imaginable use related to water, as the proposed regulations do not define the term and there is little if any known binding precedent in law creating or protecting these otherwise non-existent “rights”. The bottom line is that this is a new, arbitrary and capricious requirement, created outside EPA’s statutory authority, with little to no guidance on the scope or breadth of what it is supposed to convey.

Further, the EPA cannot place the burden of interpretation of this new and undefined regulatory area on the State of Wyoming nor the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ). Not only would such a burden be crushing and practically impossible from an administrative standpoint, but, at its foundation, would alter Tribal treaty rights through rules, instead of through the correct processes of Congressional action and court determinations described above. Even if a State could reliably solicit and submit information about the “scope, nature, and current and past use of the tribal reserved rights, as informed by the right holders,” in its WQS submissions, this would turn the model of mutual, voluntary government to government communication with Tribes on its head. 87 Fed. Reg. at 74378. Congress did not pass the CWA to have state or federal environmental agencies unilaterally decipher and establish Tribal rights and their potential scope within federal law, even “as informed by the right holders,” whatever that phrase means. Instead, express Congressional action or final court proceedings are the legally correct mechanisms for determining or defining the scope, extent, purposes, or quantity of Tribal reserved water rights

Finally, the EPA did not adequately communicate with the State of Wyoming before it promulgated this proposed rule. Executive Order 13563 requires the EPA “where feasible and appropriate, [to] seek the views of those who are likely to be affected, including . . . those who are potentially subject to such rulemaking” before issuing a notice of proposed rulemaking. *Id.* at Section 2(c). The EPA has reached out to the Tribes before issuing this proposed rule, but I am not aware of any communication or collaboration with Wyoming or local governments.

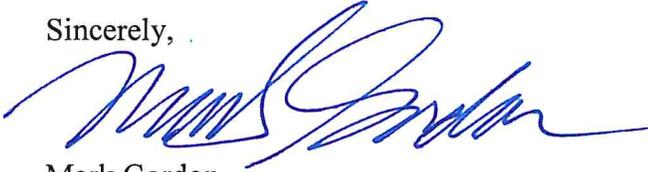
Additionally, the EPA is incorrect in its assertion that this proposed rulemaking does not have federalism implications under Executive Order 13132. 87 Fed. Reg. at 74375. For all of the reasons explained in this letter and more, this proposed rulemaking would have substantial and direct effects on the states and their relationship with the national government. The EPA is exceeding its statutory authority and upending decades of Tribal reserved rights treaty law in asserting that it can unilaterally determine or define the scope, extent, purposes, or quantity of Tribal reserved water rights under the CWA. Because of this, the EPA’s unprecedented approach violates the “principle of federalism established by the Framers.” 87 Fed. Reg. at 43256.

For these reasons, the EPA must not implement the proposed rule revisions with the current language and requirements. Instead, the EPA should conduct a complete overhaul of its proposal to address the scope of Tribal resources before beginning to direct any WQS implementation under these parameters. The EPA is required to stay within the authority granted to it by Congress and additional work and consultation with the State is necessary to give adequate clarity to the rules and protections this proposal is attempting to accomplish.

My office, along with Wyoming’s state agencies, look forward to future involvement on this topic and consultation with the EPA. In addition to these comments, attached are comments from the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality and the Wyoming State Engineer’s office.

Thank you for considering Wyoming's comments as the EPA moves forward in its proposed revisions to the Clean Water Act water quality standards. Please contact Nolan Rap in my office if you have any questions: [nolan.rap@wyo.gov](mailto:nolan.rap@wyo.gov) or 307-777-7521.

Sincerely,



Mark Gordon  
Governor of Wyoming

MG:nr:kh



# Department of Environmental Quality

*To protect, conserve and enhance the quality of Wyoming's environment for the benefit of current and future generations.*



Mark Gordon, Governor

Todd Parfitt, Director

March 2, 2023

United States Environmental Protection Agency  
EPA Docket Center  
Office of Water Docket  
Mail Code 28221T  
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20460

Submitted online via <https://www.regulations.gov>

Re: Water Quality Standards Regulatory Revisions to Protect Tribal Reserved Rights  
Docket ID No. EPA-HQ-OW-2021-0791

To Whom It May Concern,

Pursuant to both the Federal Clean Water Act (CWA) and Wyoming Statutes, the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality (WDEQ) is responsible for overseeing development and implementation of Wyoming's surface water quality standards. As such, WDEQ takes considerable interest in the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) proposed revisions to the CWA water quality standards regulation at 40 CFR Part 131 to prescribe how water quality standards must protect aquatic and aquatic-dependent resources reserved to tribes through treaties, statutes, executive orders, or other sources of Federal law. EPA's insufficient engagement with states and tribes has resulted in proposed regulations that fail to identify an implementable approach to ensure water quality standards protect applicable tribal reserved rights. In addition, the complexities and uncertainties associated with identifying and protecting applicable tribal reserved rights will easily overwhelm the already complicated and resource-intensive water quality standards revision process. This letter outlines the questions about legal authorities, the untenable proposed process for tribal consultation and EPA review, and the regulatory ambiguities associated with the proposed revisions that support these conclusions.

The proposed revisions impose significant, unfunded, and largely undefined requirements on WDEQ, tribes, and EPA. WDEQ would be required to determine whether there are explicit or implicit tribal reserved rights associated with state waters, and if so, to establish water quality standards that would protect tribal reserved rights "unsuppressed by water quality or availability of the aquatic or aquatic-dependent resource" and the health of the right holders "to at least the same risk level as provided to the general population of the state." WDEQ would also be required to submit to EPA information on the "scope, nature, and current and past use of reserved rights, as informed by the right holders." After consultation with tribes, EPA would use this information to determine whether surface water quality standards submitted by WDEQ sufficiently protect tribal reserved rights. If EPA determined that Wyoming's water quality standards failed to sufficiently protect tribal reserved rights, EPA would be required to disapprove and promulgate water quality standards for Wyoming.

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Among WDEQ's primary concerns with the revisions is the fact that many of the potentially applicable tribal reserved rights have not yet been identified, quantified, defined, agreed to by states, tribes, and the Federal government, or otherwise fully determined by a court of competent jurisdiction. The CWA state surface water quality standards revision process cannot be used as a means to identify, quantify, define, negotiate, or litigate tribal reserved rights. Neither WDEQ nor EPA have authority to define the nature and extent of tribal reserved rights. In addition, the ability of right holders to exercise their rights are dependent on a multitude of factors that extend well beyond surface water quality protections. Both the reserved rights and these factors must be identified, defined, and negotiated or otherwise fully determined by a court of competent jurisdiction on a waterbody-specific basis prior to the development of surface water quality protections for such rights. If this critical step is absent, incorporating tribal reserved rights into state water quality standards will inevitably entangle the already complex standards revision process in arenas far outside its scope. Furthermore, the proposed requirements are much too ambiguous; the process for standards development, tribal consultation, and EPA review are problematic; and established methodologies to implement the revisions are lacking.

Engagement with state coregulators, elected state and local leaders, and other stakeholders is critical to the development of implementable regulations. However, such engagement appears to have been minimal, and engagement with the WDEQ was almost non-existent despite our repeated feedback to EPA that it was imperative they engage with state coregulators.

Given the lack of engagement with states, concerns about legal authorities, and the inability to clearly define regulatory requirements, the proposed revisions are premature at best. WDEQ recommends that EPA withdraw the proposed rule to address these concerns and conduct meaningful engagement with states, tribes, and other stakeholders. WDEQ further recommends that EPA consider whether tribal reserved rights are suitable for inclusion in the federal regulations, or whether addressing tribal reserved rights on a case-by-case basis through collaboration between tribes, states, and the Federal government would be a more productive course of action. Our detailed comments are provided below.

**1. The CWA Does Not Include the Requirement That Water Quality Standards Broadly Protect Tribal Reserved Rights.** Section 303(c) of the CWA identifies that whenever states revise or adopt water quality standards, "such standards shall be such as to protect the public health or welfare, enhance the quality of water and serve the purposes of this chapter. Such standards shall be established taking into consideration their use and value for public water supplies, propagation of fish and wildlife, recreational purposes, and agricultural, industrial, and other purposes, and also taking into consideration their use and value for navigation." In addition, 40 CFR 131.12(a), requires "existing instream water uses and the level of water quality necessary to protect the existing uses" to "be maintained and protected." As such, states are already required to establish water quality standards that protect currently exercised tribal reserved rights. Likewise, 40 CFR § 131.21 already confers EPA authority to ensure that water quality standards meet the requirements of the CWA and regulations. Congress did not include within these requirements, or within the goals and objectives of the CWA, a specific directive that water quality standards broadly protect tribal reserved rights, including rights that may not currently be exercised and rights that may not be explicitly related to water quality. The lack of explicit authority in the CWA and the often undefined nature of tribal reserved rights will likely make Wyoming state water quality standards, developed to comply with the proposed revisions, vulnerable to legal challenges.

**2. Determining Tribal Reserved Rights Exceeds WDEQ's Authority.** The proposed revisions would require the WDEQ to work with tribes to identify tribal reserved rights associated with "aquatic or

aquatic dependent resources” held through “treaties, statutes, executive orders, or other sources of Federal law” as part of the CWA surface water quality standards revision process.

As acknowledged by EPA, tribal reserved rights are complicated and often require considerable deliberation, negotiation, or litigation. Rights may have been included in a treaty, treaties may not have been ratified, and rights may have been modified or not discussed in subsequent treaties. Rights may have been granted or limited in an Executive Order. Rights may have been granted or expressly abrogated by Congress. Reserved rights may be constrained by factors that both can and cannot be remedied. Rights may be implicit, vague, and ambiguous. Tribes may wish to exercise their reserved rights or not to exercise their reserved rights. Wyoming, like much of the United States, was historically home to a number of tribes that were party to treaties with the United States government. And while some of these treaties may reserve rights implicitly or otherwise, the nature and extent of many of these rights is currently unknown.

The CWA surface water quality standards revision process is not an appropriate means to determine the nature and extent of these rights. The Wyoming Environmental Quality Act (EQA) charges WDEQ with preserving and exercising the primary responsibilities and rights of the state of Wyoming. Specific to water quality standards, the EQA authorizes WDEQ to develop standards to protect waters of the state. The EQA does not authorize WDEQ to determine the nature and extent of reserved rights, nor does it authorize WDEQ to relinquish responsibility for establishing water quality standards to EPA. Therefore, because tribal reserved rights associated with state waters in Wyoming have not been clearly defined and identified, the revisions attempt to force WDEQ into a situation where it has no authority to comply with the proposed revisions.

**3. Determining Tribal Reserved Rights Exceeds EPA’s Authority.** Under the proposed revisions, EPA would determine whether states have sufficiently identified and protected applicable tribal reserved rights after tribal consultation and based on information submitted by states on the “scope, nature, and current and past use of reserved rights, as informed by the right holders.” If a state failed to comply, EPA would be required to promulgate water quality standards that protect applicable tribal reserved rights. Therefore, EPA would need to determine the potentially applicable tribal reserved rights when either acting on water quality standards submitted to EPA or when promulgating water quality standards. Although Section 511(a)(3) of the CWA outlines that the CWA should “not be construed as...affecting or impairing the provisions of any treaty of the United States,” the CWA does not authorize EPA to determine the nature and extent of tribal reserved rights; arbitrate, negotiate, or litigate reserved rights; or determine how a tribe may or may not exercise a reserved right. Determination of tribal reserved rights is governed directly by tribal-state negotiations, specific lines of authority found in U.S. Supreme Court case law, state-specific water adjudications, and other specifically binding sources of legal authority, not indirectly through unilateral agency rulemaking. As such, EPA should not assert such authorities in future discussions regarding tribal reserved rights.

**4. The Proposed Revisions Will Burden Wyoming’s Surface Water Quality Standards Revision Process and Create Legal Vulnerabilities.** If finalized, the proposed regulations would immediately require Wyoming to identify potentially applicable tribal reserved rights and establish water quality standards necessary to protect reserved rights. If Wyoming failed to do so, EPA would be required to promulgate such standards. If such protections were not included in Wyoming’s water quality standards, both Wyoming and EPA would be out of compliance with the regulations and vulnerable to legal challenges. However, to sufficiently protect reserved rights, Wyoming (or EPA) may need to review and potentially update Wyoming’s water quality criteria for aquatic life, wildlife, and consumption of aquatic life. Wyoming may also need to develop new or site-specific water quality criteria to protect reserved rights.

This process is extremely complex, resource-intensive, and likely must be carefully negotiated, or litigated, between states, tribes, and the Federal government. The surface water quality standards revision process is already complicated, resource-intensive, and subject to delays. EPA already often fails to meet statutory deadlines, even without the complexity of addressing tribal reserved rights.

**5. Formal Consultation Must Occur Before States Initiate a Triennial Review, Water Quality Standards Developed Once Applicable Tribal Reserved Rights Have Been Agreed Upon.** The proposed revisions require states to submit information to EPA “on the scope, nature, and current and past use of the tribal reserved rights, as informed by the right holders.” In reviewing state water quality standards, EPA would be required to “initiate tribal consultation with the right holders...in determining whether State water quality standards protect applicable reserved rights.” The proposed process does not require EPA to formally consult with the tribes or provide feedback to Wyoming on reserved rights and the level of water quality necessary to support the reserved rights until after our water quality standards revision process has been completed. Although WDEQ could reach out to tribes early in the water quality standards revision process, some tribes prefer to only engage with the Federal government and may not engage directly with WDEQ. Therefore, by the time of formal consultation, WDEQ would have already invested significant resources to develop, revise, and adopt water quality standards. Partner agencies and stakeholders would have also invested significant resources into the process—the standards would have been through scoping and multiple public notices. The standards would have been reviewed by legal counsel and our Water and Water Advisory Board, adopted by the Environmental Quality Council, and approved by the governor. As such, the proposed process does not provide critical information early enough in the rule revision process, nor does it sufficiently recognize the resources Wyoming expends in revising water quality standards or the resources that Wyoming would need to expend if water quality standards are disapproved. WDEQ’s previous efforts to engage EPA early in the rule revision have not prevented disapprovals, as EPA has not always been forthcoming about which revisions they view as problematic.

Not only is the proposed process inefficient, the process is also unlikely to result in EPA and states being able to meet regulatory timeframes. Section 303(c) of the CWA requires states to review their water quality standards at least every three years and for EPA to review and approve submissions within 60 days or disapprove submissions within 90 days. Federal guidance<sup>1</sup> on tribal consultation directs federal agencies to provide tribes with 30 days written notice and a 30-day comment period, after which EPA must provide responses to the comments received. Therefore, as proposed, EPA would not have sufficient time to conduct the tribal consultation and approve state water quality standards submissions. Moreover, because tribal reserved rights and the levels of water quality sufficient to protect the rights are so complex, delays with the approval process appear inevitable. This makes states and EPA vulnerable to legal challenges.

Further, 40 CFR § 131.3(l) defines “Indian Tribe or Tribe” as “any Indian Tribe, band, group, or community recognized by the Secretary of the Interior and exercising governmental authority over a Federal Indian reservation.” Some tribes have clearly defined governance structures that can serve in an official capacity during the water quality standards revision process, but others do not. In circumstances where a tribe does not have a defined governance structure, a formal consultation process may not be possible.

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<sup>1</sup> [TTR BEST PRACTICES FLOWCHART \(bia.gov\)](#)

**6. Insufficient Local and State Consultation Process, as Required in Executive Order 13132<sup>2</sup>.** In the federal register notice, EPA concludes that Executive Order 13132 does not apply to this action. Executive Order 13132 outlines that the Agency cannot promulgate rules with federalism implications,<sup>3</sup> including those that pre-empt state and local laws, unless the agency provides all affected State and local officials notice and an opportunity for appropriate participation in the proceedings. As part of evaluating whether surface water quality standards sufficiently protect tribal reserved rights, the proposed revisions grant EPA the authority to determine the scope, nature, and extent of tribal reserved rights. The ability of a tribal member to exercise their reserved rights associated with aquatic and aquatic-dependent resources undoubtedly requires consideration of state and local laws, particularly as they relate to access, allocation of water, and fish and wildlife conservation and management. As such, the proposed revisions have the potential to conflict with state and local laws and authorities.

EPA described in the preamble that they provided a conceptual overview of the draft regulations for the Association of Clean Water Administrators (ACWA) Monitoring, Standards and Assessment Subcommittee and held three additional one-on-one meetings with individual states upon request. EPA did not describe any additional consultation with elected state and local officials, nor is WDEQ aware of any efforts made by EPA to engage beyond water quality management agencies. Due to the potential implications of the proposed revisions to local and state laws, EPA is required under Executive Order 13132 to consult with state and local officials as part of the regulation revision process.

**7. Insufficient State Consultation Process in Developing the Proposed Revisions.** The preamble states that the core of the water quality standards regulation was established in 1983 and that EPA has revised the regulations only three times since 1983. The preamble further describes that the EPA's state consultation process consisted of providing a conceptual overview of the draft regulations for the ACWA's Monitoring, Standards and Assessment Subcommittee and holding three additional one-on-one meetings with individual states upon request. WDEQ requested additional outreach and engagement on the proposed revisions on multiple occasions; however, these requests were not honored by EPA.

Given that states have the primary responsibility for developing surface water quality standards, WDEQ/WQD is alarmed by EPA's lack of engagement with states during development of the proposed revisions. The fact that the proposed revisions impose new, significant, and far-reaching requirements on states that may conflict with other state laws and authorities emphasizes that engagement with states is critical. ACWA and the Environmental Council of States are important national organizations that represent states. However, these organization do not represent all states, and engagement with these organizations should be in addition to, not instead of, engagement with individual states.

In addition, EPA never addressed questions that states posed through ACWA. For example, EPA relayed during one of these discussions that hundreds of reserved rights exist, but EPA never provided individual states with information about where the rights may be applicable so that states could have this invaluable context when reviewing the proposed revisions.

Since cooperative federalism is essential to successful development and implementation of water quality standards under the CWA, states must be more thoroughly integrated into the regulation

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<sup>2</sup> Executive Order 13132, Federalism: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-1999-08-10/pdf/99-20729.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Federalism implications are defined as having substantial direct effects on states or local governments (individually or collectively), on the relationship between the national government and the states, or on the distribution of power and responsibilities among the various levels of government.

development and revision process. EPA should have provided states and tribes with early engagement opportunities in order to provide meaningful feedback to inform the regulation revision process. WDEQ recommends EPA initiate a meaningful collaborative cooperative federalism and nation-to-nation consultation process with states and tribes collectively.

**8. The Proposed Revisions Lack Clarity Regarding Aquatic and Aquatic-Dependent Resources.** The proposed revisions require states to protect tribal reserved rights “to the extent supported by available data and information,” associated with “aquatic and aquatic-dependent resources that are either reserved or held by tribes, either expressly or implicitly.” The proposed revisions do not further define these terms, nor do they limit the proposed revisions to those reserved rights directly dependent on surface water quality. The proposed revisions do not consider the existing body of directly applicable case law specifically addressing treaty rights (e.g., hunting, fishing, gathering). Since many tribal reserved rights may be broad and these broad rights may depend to some extent on surface water quality, the proposed revisions have the potential to greatly expand the factors that must be considered during development of surface water quality protections. As a result, WDEQ would need to expend considerable resources determining and negotiating whether a particular reserved right would require water quality protections. WDEQ would then need to expend considerable resources determining and negotiating the levels of water quality necessary to protect the reserved right. Therefore, despite the limitation that the protections be based on “available data and information,” the proposed regulations do not provide sufficient clarity to avoid protracted negotiations and legal liabilities regarding which reserved rights require protections under the proposed rule.

**9. The Proposed Revisions Lacks Clarity Regarding Tribal Reserved Rights “Unsuppressed by Water Quality and Availability.”** The proposed revisions require water quality standards to “the extent supported by available data and information” to protect “the exercise of tribal reserved rights unsuppressed by water quality or availability of the aquatic or aquatic-dependent resource.” However, the proposed revisions do not further define these considerations. Determining whether a reserved right is suppressed via water quality versus some other direct or indirect factor is complex and resource intensive, particularly on the scale that may be necessary to protect reserved rights. For example, fishing rights are affected by population management, which may be limited due to surface water quality as well as habitat degradation, invasive species, disease, and a number of other factors. And although EPA has offered resources to assist states, “available data and information” is subject to interpretation and EPA’s resources to assist states are limited. Therefore, the proposed regulations do not provide sufficient clarity to avoid protracted negotiations and legal liabilities regarding the level of water quality necessary to protect potentially applicable tribal reserved rights.

**10. Neither EPA nor States Have Water Quality Criteria or Methodologies to Derive Water Quality Criteria to Protect the Potentially Applicable Tribal Reserved Rights.** Development of water quality standards to protect tribal reserved rights may require the establishment of designated uses and water quality criteria that have not been contemplated under either Wyoming’s surface water quality standards or EPA’s nationally recommended water quality criteria. The potential breadth of tribal reserved rights contemplated under the proposed revisions may require derivation of water quality criteria for which there are currently no agreed-upon methodologies. The potentially applicable reserved rights must be identified and methodologies must be developed, agreed upon, and finalized prior to imposing requirements to protect such uses.

**11. The Proposed Revisions Do Not Provide Sufficient Flexibility to Not Include Tribal Reserved Rights or for Tribes to Decline Consultation When Appropriate.** The proposed revisions require the

identification and protection of tribal reserved rights, as informed by the right holders, and require EPA to consult with tribes. The proposed revisions do not explicitly provide a means for tribes to decline protections associated with a reserved right or for a tribe to decline consultation. There are likely a number of factors that will influence tribes' interest in protecting reserved rights and consulting with EPA. The proposed revisions should be revised accordingly so that states do not face legal challenges when reserved rights are not included in surface water quality standards.

**12. The Proposed Revisions Lack Clarity Regarding Quantities of Water.** Although 40 CFR § 131.4 describes "Consistent with section 101(g) and 518(a) of the CWA, water quality standards shall not be construed to supersede or abrogate rights to quantities of water," the federal register notice states that "Tribal reserved rights as defined in this proposed rulemaking **generally do not address** the quantification of *Winters* rights" that reserve sufficient water to accomplish the purposes of a reservation<sup>4</sup>. WDEQ is concerned with EPA's unwillingness to definitively say that the proposed revisions will not interfere with the allocation of *Winters* rights, despite (1) the fact that most of the reserved rights contemplated under the proposed revisions are likely to be associated with off-reservation waters and (2) both the CWA and the federal regulations include explicit statements that water quality standards are not to supersede or abrogate rights to quantities of water. Since the topic of water rights extends well beyond WDEQ's, EPA's, and CWA authorities, discussions regarding water quality protections associated with tribal reserved rights must explicitly exclude any determination, quantification, or definition of federal reserved water rights.

**13. Water Quality Standards Protective of Tribal Reserved Rights Must Recognize Limitations.** Since many tribal reserved rights are broad (e.g., hunting, fishing, gathering) and therefore dependent on a number of factors outside the scope of water quality standards, there are likely a number of instances where tribal reserved rights are no longer supported or attainable. Efforts by states to develop water quality standards to protect tribal reserved rights must recognize these limitations without requiring states to conduct use attainability analyses, discharger-specific variances, or other in-depth and resource-intensive evaluations. Without this allowance, the extensive nature of reserved rights and the multitude of factors that influence reserved rights place an unreasonable burden on states.

WDEQ appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on the proposed revisions. Given WDEQ's extensive concerns with the proposed regulations, WDEQ recommends EPA withdraw the proposed rule and conduct meaningful engagement with states and tribes. To this end, WDEQ is ready to engage further with EPA and tribes on this important issue. Please contact Lindsay Patterson, Surface Water Quality Standards Supervisor, at 307-777-7079 or [Lindsay.Patterson@wyo.gov](mailto:Lindsay.Patterson@wyo.gov), should you have any questions regarding these comments.

Sincerely,



Todd Parfitt, Director

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<sup>4</sup> Footnote 6 of the proposed describes that "Under *Winters v. United States* and its progeny, the establishment of a Federal reservation (Indian or otherwise) implicitly reserves sufficient water to accomplish the purposes of the reservation 207 U.S. 564, 576 (1908); *Cappaert v. United States*, 426 U.S. 128, 139 (1976); *Arizona v. California*, 373 U.S. 546, 597-602 (1963).

cc: Jennifer Zygmunt, Water Quality Division Administrator  
David Waterstreet, Watershed Protection Section Manager  
Chris Brown, Attorney General's Office  
Kit Wendtland, Office of the Governor  
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# State Engineer's Office

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March 3, 2023

United States Environmental Protection Agency  
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Mail Code 28221T  
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20460

Submitted online via <https://www.regulations.gov>

Re: Water Quality Standards Regulatory Revisions to Protect Tribal Reserved Rights  
Docket ID No. EPA-HQ-OW-2021-0791

To Whom It May Concern,

The Wyoming State Engineer's Office (WSEO) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the proposed Water Quality Standards Regulatory Revisions to Protect Tribal Reserved Rights rulemaking as outlined in the December 5, 2022 Federal Register Notice. WSEO also supports and joins the comments from Wyoming Governor Mark Gordon and the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality in whole.

Wyoming holds title to water within its borders in a sovereign capacity as representative of all the people for the purpose of guaranteeing that the common rights of all are equally protected. Wyo. Const. art. 8 § 1; art. 1 § 31; *Merrill v. Bishop*, 287 P.2d 620, 625 (Wyo. 1955); See also *Farm Inv. Co. v. Carpenter*, 61 P. 258, 265 (Wyo. 1900). Wyoming constitutional and statutory provisions charge the State Engineer and the State Board of Control with the supervision, appropriation, distribution, and diversion of surface and groundwater use within the state. Wyo. Const. art. 8 §§ 2, 5; See, e.g., Wyo. Stat. Ann. §§ 41-4-502 through -511. The need for the state to control the use of its limited and precious water resources compelled Wyoming's Constitutional declaration of water ownership, and its history of water law and water administration that has since developed.

Wyoming's Environmental Quality Act, under which Wyoming regulates water quality, further respects the diversion and use of water, as well as the State Engineer and State Board of Control's authority over those activities. "Nothing in this act shall be construed to supersede or abrogate any valid water right. It is recognized that diversion of water caused by the exercise of a valid water right is an allowable practice." Wyo. Stat. Ann. § 35-11-302(c). "Nothing in this

act:...Limits or interferes with the jurisdiction, duties or authority of the state engineer, the state board of control..." Wyo. Stat. Ann. § 35-11-1104(a)(iii).

The Clean Water Act (CWA) provides that it is the "policy of Congress to recognize, preserve, and protect the primary responsibilities of States to . . . plan the development and use of land and water resources." 33 U.S.C. § 1251(b). Additionally, the CWA states: "It is the policy of Congress that the authority of each State to allocate quantities of water within its jurisdiction shall not be superseded, abrogated or otherwise impaired by this chapter. It is the further policy of Congress that nothing in this chapter shall be construed to supersede or abrogate rights to quantities of water which have been established by any State." 33 U.S.C. § 1251(g). As recognized by the CWA, Wyoming has an important, sovereign interest in protecting its ability to plan for the use of its limited water resources, and to allocate its waters for those uses according to state law. The proposed rule does not give sufficient weight and deference to state interests, needs, priorities, and concerns. In Wyoming, where water scarcity is pervasive, it is important that any rule also explicitly acknowledge the primary and often exclusive role of the States in allocating and administering rights to the use of water under authorities to which the Congress has a long history of deference.

Due in part to the widely variable nature of tribal reserved rights, the proposed rule is so vague and ambiguous that it is impossible to predict the full extent of its impact on Wyoming's exclusive authority to allocate and administer quantities of water within its jurisdiction. EPA acknowledges the complexity of determining the nature and geographic scope of tribal reserved rights, and whether they even apply in water subject to state water quality standards. At the same time, EPA offers no helpful guidance about making those determinations other than requiring engagement with potential right holders. Those potential right holders, and EPA itself, have no authority to determine the nature or geographic scope of tribal reserved rights outside of established and legally binding methods of review, as laid out in a multitude of court decisions. Further, no consideration is given to the holders of other lawful rights that may be impacted by the rule's application. In fact, EPA acknowledges its uncertainty regarding the outcome of the proposed rule's application. The proposed rule establishes newly created, potentially far-reaching consequences and concepts which are undefined and subject to agency discretion. The rule threatens to impair—not recognize, preserve, and protect—Wyoming's ability to plan for the use of its limited water resources, and to allocate its waters for those uses according to state law.

The proposed rule was also created without state consultation. Like other states, Wyoming plays a significant role in ensuring effective implementation of the CWA. Our co-regulator status, shared by the other states and many tribes, elevates Wyoming and other co-regulators above the multitude of stakeholders now engaged in the public review process. It is imperative that with a rulemaking process of this magnitude, which directly impacts the states' implementation of CWA programs, that significant input and review be provided to co-regulator entities on the substance of the proposed rule before it is drafted. However, Wyoming and other states were not included in this rulemaking process in any meaningful way.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed rule, and we ask that EPA withdraw it due to its deficiencies.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Brandon Gebhart". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Brandon Gebhart, P.E.  
Wyoming State Engineer

Cc: Nolan Rap, Natural Resources Policy Advisor, Governor Mark Gordon  
Todd Parfitt, Director, Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality  
Chris Brown, Wyoming Attorney General's Office