

EPA says no to Portland's open reservoirs

By James Mayer, The Oregonian

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Doug Beghtel/The OregonianMt. Tabor reservoir

The federal government has given Portland its final word: There's no exception to a rule requiring Portland to replace its open drinking water reservoirs.

"The EPA has closed the door and they have closed it hard," Water Bureau Administrator David Shaff said Wednesday.

The word came in a letter to Commissioner Randy Leonard, who oversees the Water Bureau, from Peter S. Silva, assistant administrator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

It appears to put an end to a long struggle between Portland and the federal agency over the rule, aimed at controlling the parasite cryptosporidium and other contaminants in drinking water. The rule also requires treatment of the city's Bull Run water supply. The city, which contends that its water supply is safe, continues to seek guidance on how to avoid building the treatment plant.

Silva's letter says the EPA found that uncovered finished water reservoirs like those in Portland "were subject to contamination from many sources including birds, animals, humans, algae, insects, and airborne deposition."

In November, Leonard asked the EPA for guidance, citing two potential variances included in the Safe Drinking Water Act.

In his reply, Silva said neither variance applies to the city's open reservoirs.

One of the variances applies only to treatment of the source water, Silva said. The other variance applies if there's an alternative treatment that is at least as effective as the technique specified in the rule. During development of the rule, the EPA considered allowing cities to adopt a plan to reduce the risk as an alternative to a covering the reservoirs, but the agency did not include the alternative in the final rule.

Leonard said the letter resolves the issue.

"We have been pursuing a dual path, seeking a variance and constructing replacement storage on Powell Butte and Kelly Butte that will replicate the storage on Mt. Tabor," he said. The city must have the projects completed by April 1, 2014.

Silva said the city should proceed with that plan, which also includes building an underground tank beneath one reservoir in Washington Park, and leaving the other reservoir there as a back-up.

Leonard said the reservoirs, once they aren't needed for drinking water storage could

be used for "any number of things, whatever the community desires."

--James Mayer