



Updates: Wallowa Lake drum removal

June 18, 2019

EPA and DEQ working to remove drums found in Wallowa Lake

Joseph, OR— The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, with assistance from the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, is investigating reports of drums found at the bottom of Wallowa Lake reportedly labeled with the herbicides "2,4-D or 2,4,5-T." EPA and DEQ are investigating to determine what the drums contain and how to potentially remove them. This work started at the lake on June 12.

Over the years, many 55-gallon drums have been filled with rocks and concrete to be used as anchors for floating docks. EPA and DEQ anticipate the reported drums may be similarly harmless given this history, but they won't know for sure until the drums are removed and tested.

For this reason, the response team is proceeding with an abundance of caution and treating the drums as if they pose a threat to public health, safety and the environment. Teams have tested the water and lake sediment for the herbicides; no herbicide has previously been found in the drinking water from the lake.

Oregon Health Authority advises that visitors to Wallowa Lake may continue with normal activities until further notice

EPA and DEQ are working with the City of Joseph, Wallowa Lake State Park, Oregon Department of State Lands, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Oregon Health Authority, Oregon State Marine Board, Wallowa County Sheriff's Office, Nez Perce Tribe, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, and Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation.

UPDATE: June 18

Divers removed three drums from Wallowa Lake on Monday: one marked "Inspected" that was not intact, one marked "Hosp" that was not intact, and one seemingly intact drum that had no label. Divers have now removed a total of five drums. EPA determined all five drums have holes

and contain lake water after evaluating them on land. EPA discovered additional drums today, bringing the total number of drums in the inspection area to 72. Most of these drums are unlabeled and rusted out with holes. There are four drums remaining for divers to inspect tomorrow, to determine if they are intact or if they have labels that indicate they may once have contained a hazardous substance. All sediment samples were collected and shipped for analysis. Operations on the lake will likely conclude at the end of day Tuesday.

UPDATE: June 16

EPA contractors removed two drums late Sunday, including one drum labeled with "2,4-D or 2,4,5-T." This drum was not intact—it was rusted with holes—and continues to be the single drum confirmed to have an herbicide label. Divers placed the rusted drum in a new black overpack drum prior to removal to contain any substances that may have been in the corroded drum. Upon opening the drum, the contents appeared to be lake water. Out of an abundance of caution, responders sampled the water in the drum and will submit to a laboratory for 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T analyses. The second drum contractors removed was unlabeled and appeared to be intact. EPA will sample its contents on Monday for analysis. EPA has now identified 69 total drums in the area, most of which appear to be unlabeled and rusted out with holes. There are approximately 12 drums that are potentially intact and are undergoing further investigation by divers. Divers will continue detailed inspections of the drums. EPA will prioritize removing any drum, intact or rusted out, that has a label indicating it may have once contained a hazardous substance. Divers continued taking sediment samples at the lake bottom. Crews will continue investigation and could remove additional high priority drums Monday.

UPDATE: June 15

EPA and DEQ have completed the survey of the area of drums identified by Blue Mountain Divers. A remotely operated vehicle and contract divers have found 68 drums. Responders have found no 100-gallon drums but have found two floats made of two 55-gallon drums welded together. One drum with a label "2,4-D or 2,4,5-T" has been found to-date. It is not intact and appears to be filled with water. Divers are continuing to conduct visual and tactile inspections of the drums. Depending on safety conditions, EPA will remove drums that are intact, and, out of an abundance of caution, will also remove drums that are not intact but have labels indicating they once contained hazardous substances. Again, responders have found one drum to-date with an herbicide label, and that drum is not intact and appears to be filled with water. Drum removal is expected to begin Sunday, June 16. EPA and DEQ also took samples of lake water and lake sediment today.

Contacts:

Bill Dunbar, U.S. EPA, 206-245-7452, dunbar.bill@epa.gov

Laura Gleim, Oregon DEQ, 541-633-2030, gleim.laura@deq.state.or.us