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I D A H O

UI, Hayden join forces for water study

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[Becky Kramer](#)

Staff writer

HAYDEN _ A flush of the toilet signals out of sight, out of mind for most people.

To University of Idaho professor Greg Moller, however, the flush is where research begins. The wastewater running down sewer pipes is rich in phosphorous, a chemical compound leading to luxuriant algae growth in rivers and lakes. It also contains small amounts of hormones from birth control pills and Viagra, plus anti-depressants and prescription drugs.

"People think you flush and it's gone," Moller said. In reality, many of those contaminants end up in rivers and streams.

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wastewater treatment plant. About 60 people attended a Wednesday groundbreaking ceremony for the research lab that will open in September.

Kent Helmer, the treatment plant's administrator, called the facility a good collaboration. The plants' workers are looking forward to exchanging ideas with researchers. And of course, there's plenty of material for researchers to work with.

The treatment plant serves an area with 6,000 people, processing more than 1 million gallons of wastewater each day. Eight months out of the year, the plant discharges treated water into the Spokane River. Sometimes, the plant has difficulty meeting the standards for zinc, Helmer said.

"The Spokane River is getting tougher and tougher for regulations,"

UI and a private firm, Blue Water Technologies, are looking for ways to return cleaner water to the region's rivers. Some of their work will be done at a \$500,000 wastewater research facility in Hayden.

The lab will be located at the Hayden Area Regional Sewer Board's

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he said.

The squeeze occurs as population growth puts pressure on the Spokane River, an outlet for numerous cities' treatment plants. The river suffers from low levels of dissolved oxygen, historic mining waste and industrial discharges.

So far, much of UI's research has focused on phosphorus, one of the most heavily regulated compounds in the wastewater, Moller said.

Phosphorus is a key nutrient for growth. It's found in food, plants and fertilizers, and it frequently passes into the wastestream, Moller said. Phosphorus is a problem in lakes and rivers, because it encourages algae growth, which sucks oxygen out of the water.

UI professors began developing a process for removing phosphorus from water in the mid-1990s. Last year, the university licensed the technology and patent to Blue Water Technologies, which gave the company the commercial rights to the process.

Blue Water Technologies is working with a Simplot potato processing plant in southern Idaho on a pilot project for scrubbing phosphorus from its wastewater, said Remy Newcombe, the company's chief technology officer. The firm also has two cheese factories as clients, and has done some work for the wastewater treatment plant in Moscow, Idaho.

Over the years, Moller has received about \$1 million in grants for his wastewater research at UI. Next year, he'll begin studies on removing hormones and prescription drugs from water. It's an area of emerging concern, he said.

Texas researchers found five types of anti-depressants in frog tissue. Hormones and other "endocrine disrupters," such as dioxin and PCBs, can lead to male fish developing female characteristics.

Moller said sewage treatment plants do a good job of screening solids from the water, but there's an awful more that flushes down the toilet, he said.

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