

FEB 16 2012

The Honorable Mark Pryor
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Pryor:

Thank you for your December 9, 2011, letter to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator Lisa P. Jackson discussing your concerns related to the Illinois River Watershed in Arkansas and Oklahoma, and specifically the EPA's ongoing efforts to develop a scientifically robust model of the watershed. Because the states of Arkansas and Oklahoma are within the jurisdiction of Region 6, I have been asked to respond to your concerns.

The EPA is keenly aware of the significant investments made by communities in both Arkansas and Oklahoma to improve water quality in the Illinois River Watershed, including those associated with the Statement of Joint Principles and Actions signed by agencies in both states in 2002. The EPA is also aware that Oklahoma's applicable phosphorus criterion is currently under review by the state. While much has been accomplished with respect to limiting phosphorus loads from both point and nonpoint sources in the watershed, there remains an ongoing need for continued collaboration among stakeholders. The present and future quality of the Illinois River, its tributaries, and the waterbodies into which it flows are not only important shared priorities for Arkansas and Oklahoma, but for the EPA as well. As noted in your letter, with the support and input of both Arkansas and Oklahoma, the EPA has been engaged in developing a multi-jurisdictional watershed model to better understand the relationships between sources of phosphorus and water quality conditions in the Illinois River Watershed, and to assess potential phosphorus load reductions necessary to meet water quality goals in both states. The EPA appreciates your interest in ensuring that the model we ultimately produce is scientifically sound, and we are taking important steps to achieve that result.

The EPA has prioritized inclusion of substantial stakeholder involvement at every decision point in the project. Since the outset of our model development efforts, the EPA has actively and purposefully reached out to states, tribes, and other interested stakeholders in the watershed to ensure that our model reflects the best available scientific information. The EPA has maximized the transparency of our public participation process through a public website devoted to model development and has solicited public input via a Federal Register notice, newspaper notices, and numerous public meetings involving stakeholders representing a broad range of interests from both states.

To further ensure the scientific integrity of our watershed model, the EPA has built into the project schedule avenues for stakeholders to provide input. The EPA conducts monthly conference calls with state and tribal agencies, as well as informational public meetings throughout the watershed to provide project updates and solicit stakeholder input. To date, the EPA has convened public meetings in Ft. Smith, Siloam Springs, and Rogers, Arkansas, as well as one in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. Additional meetings will be held as the project progresses.

Throughout the model development process, the EPA is sharing project deliverables for review and comment by interested stakeholders. To date, such deliverables include the Project Quality Assurance Project Plan (QAPP), the Data Gap Analysis Report, the GIS Database, the Water Quality Model Recommendation Technical Memorandum and the Simulation Plan and Modeling QAPP. Interested parties have provided valuable feedback. The EPA will continue to ensure states, tribes, and stakeholders are a part of the process and will make future deliverables and the model available for review at key points in the project before the model is finalized.

As reflected by the steps already taken by the EPA to ensure a thorough and rigorous review of our watershed modeling efforts, the EPA is committed to ensuring the scientific validity of our Illinois River Watershed model. We will continue to take advantage of available opportunities to gain critical feedback on our efforts, and we will give careful consideration to whether additional peer review over the extensive stakeholder reviews would benefit the process. In evaluating peer review options, the EPA must consider the availability of resources and the timeframes required for such reviews. While the agency must ensure the scientific rigor of our efforts, we are also committed to completing the work in a reasonable timeframe in order to avoid prolonged uncertainty on the part of regulated dischargers in the watershed.

If you have further questions, please contact me at (214) 665-2100, or your staff may contact Ms. LaWanda Thomas, Congressional Liaison, at (214) 665-7466.

Sincerely yours,

/s/ AL ARMENDARIZ

Al Armendariz
Regional Administrator

Identical letters sent to:

The Honorable Jim Inhofe
United States Senate

The Honorable Tom Coburn
United States Senate

The Honorable John Boozman
United States Senate

The Honorable Dan Boren
House of Representatives

The Honorable Steve Womack
House of Representatives