Ecological Research Series

Water Quality Criteria 1972

ATTACHMENT 18

EPA·R3·73·033·March 1973

National Academy of Sciences,
National Academy of Engineering,
1973 [1974], Water quality criteria
1972: U.S. Environmental Protection
Agency, 594 p.

Water Quality Criteria 1972

A Report of the
Committee on Water Quality Criteria

Environmental Studies Board

National Academy of Sciences
National Academy of Engineering

Washington, D.C., 1972

At the request of
and funded by
The Environmental Protection Agency
Washington, D.C., 1972

GENERAL TABLE OF CONTENTS

MIXING ZONES

When a liquid discharge is made to a receiving system, a zone of mixing is created. Although recent public, administrative, and scientific emphasis has focused on mixing zones for the dispersion of heated discharges, liquid wastes of all types are included in the following considerations. (For a further discussion of Mixing Zones see Appendix II–A.)

DEFINITION OF A MIXING ZONE

A mixing zone is a region in which a discharge of quality characteristics different from those of the receiving water is in transit and progressively diluted from the source to the receiving system. In this region water quality characteristics necessary for the protection of aquatic life are based on time-exposure relationships of organisms. The boundary of a mixing zone is where the organism response is no longer time-dependent. At that boundary, receiving system water quality characteristics based on long-term exposure will protect aquatic life.

Recommendation

Although water quality characteristics in mixing zones may differ from those in receiving systems, to protect uses in both regions it is recommended that mixing zones be free of substances attributable to discharges or wastes as follows:

- **materials which form objectionable deposits;**
- **scum, oil and floating debris;**
- **substances producing objectionable color, odor, taste, or turbidity;**
- **conditions which produce objectionable growth of nuisance plants and animals.**

GENERAL PHYSICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The mass emission rates of the most critical constituents and their relationship to the recommended values of the material in the receiving water body are normally the primary factors determining the system-degradation potential of an effluent. Prior to establishment of a mixing zone the factors described in Waste Capacity of Receiving Waters (Section IV, pp. 228–232) and Assimilative Capacity (This Section, p. 111) should be considered and a decision made on whether the system can assimilate the discharge without damage to beneficial uses. Necessary data bases may include:

- Discharge considerations—flow regime, volume, design, location, rate of mixing and dilution, plume behavior and mass-emission rates of constituents including knowledge of their persistence, toxicity, and chemical or physical behavior with time.
- Receiving system considerations—water quality, local meteorology, flow regime (including low-flow records), magnitude of water exchange at point of discharge, stratification phenomena, waste capacity of the receiving system including retention time, turbulence and speed of flow as factors affecting rate of mixing and passage of entrained or migrating organisms, and morphology of the receiving system as related to plume behavior, and biological phenomena.

Mathematical models based in part on the above considerations are available for a variety of ecosystems and discharges. (See Appendix II-A.) All such mathematical models must be applied with care to each particular discharge and the local situation.

Recommendation

To avoid potential biological damage or interference with other uses of the receiving system it is recommended that mixing zone characteristics be defined on a case-by-case basis after determination that the assimilative capacity of the receiving system can safely accommodate the discharge taking into consideration the physical, chemical, and biological characteristics of the discharge and the receiving system, the life history and behavior of organisms in the receiving system, and desired uses of the waters.

GENERAL BIOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Organisms in the water body may be divided into two groups from the standpoint of protection within mixing zones: (1) nonmobile benthic or sessile organisms; (2) weak and strong swimmers.

1. Nonmobile benthic or sessile organisms in mixing zones may experience long or intermittent exposures exceeding recommended values for receiving systems and therefore their populations may be damaged or eliminated in the local region. Minimum damage to these organisms is attained by minimizing exposure of the bottom area to concentrations exceeding levels resulting in harm to these organisms from long-term exposure. This may be accomplished by discharge location and design.

The mixing zone may represent a living space denied the subject organisms and this space may or may not be of significance to the biological community of the receiving system. When planning mixing zones, a decision should be made in each case whether the nonmobile benthic and sessile organisms are to be protected.

Recommendation

To protect populations of nonmobile benthic and sessile organisms in mixing zones it is recommended that the area of their habitat exposed to water quality poorer than recommended receiving system quality be minimized by discharge location and design or that intermittent time-exposure history relationships be defined for the organisms' well-being.

2. Biological considerations to protect planktonic and swimming organisms are related to the time exposure history to which critical organisms are subjected as they are carried or move through a mixing zone. The integrated time exposure history must not cause deleterious effects, including post-exposure effects. In populations of important species, effects of total time exposure must not be deleterious either during or after exposure.

Weak swimmers and drifting organisms may be entrained into discharge plumes and carried through a mixing zone. In determining the time exposure history and responses of the organisms, the possibility of delayed effects, such as death, disease, and increased vulnerability to predation, should be investigated.

Strong swimmers are capable of moving out of, staying out of, or remaining in a mixing zone. Water quality characteristics which protect drifting organisms should also protect migrating fish moving through mixing zones. However, there are some discharges that attract animals into discharge channels and mixing zones where they are vulnerable to death or shock due to short-term changes in water quality, such as rapid temperature fluctuations. This vulnerability should be recognized and occurrences that expose it should be guarded against (see Chlorine, page 189).

Some free-swimming species may avoid mixing zones and as a consequence the reduced living space may limit the population.

Free-swimming species may be attracted to a discharge. Chronic low-level exposure to toxicants may cause death or affect growth, reproduction or migratory instincts, or result in excessive body-burdens of toxicants hazardous for human consumption.

Recommendation

To protect drifting and both weak and strong swimming organisms in mixing zones it is recommended that scientifically valid data be developed to demonstrate that the organisms can survive without irreversible damage, the integrated time-exposure history to be based on maximum expected residence time so that deleterious effects on populations of important species do not occur.

MEETING THE RECOMMENDATIONS

In mixing zones the exposure of organisms to stress is of greater intensity but usually of shorter duration than in the receiving waters, assuming no attraction by the discharge. The objective of mixing zone water quality recommendations is to provide time exposure histories which produce negligible or no effects on populations of critical species in the receiving system. This objective can be met by: (a) determination of the pattern of exposure in terms of time and concentration in the mixing zone due either to activities of the organisms, discharge schedule, or currents affecting dispersion; and (b) determination that delayed effects do not occur.

Protection would be achieved if the time of exposure met the relationship $T/ET(x) \leq 1$ where T is the time of the organism's exposure in the mixing zone to a specified concentration, and ET(x) is the effective time of exposure to the specified concentration, C, which produces (x) per cent response in a sample of the organisms, including delayed effects after extended observation. The per cent response, (x), is selected on the basis of what is considered negligible effects on the total population and is then symbolized ET(25), ET(5), ET(0.1), etc.

Because concentrations vary within mixing zones, a more suitable quantitative statement than the simple relationship $T/ET(x) \leq 1$ is:

$$\frac{T_1}{ET(x)\text{ at }C_1} + \frac{T_2}{ET(x)\text{ at }C_2} + \frac{T_3}{ET(x)\text{ at }C_3} \cdots + \frac{T_n}{ET(x)\text{ at }C_n} \leq 1$$

where the time of exposure of an organism passing through the mixing zone has been broken into increments, T_1, T_2, T_3, etc. The organism is considered to be exposed to concentration C_1 during the time interval T_1, to concentration C_2 during the time interval T_2, etc. The sum of the individual ratios must then not exceed unity. (See caveat below, Short Time Exposure Safety Factors.)

Techniques for securing the above information, application to a hypothetical field situation, comments, caveats, and limitations are expressed in Appendix II–A, Mixing Zones, Development of Integrated Time Exposure Data, p. 403. Tabular data and formulae for summation of short-term effects of heated discharges on aquatic life are provided in the Heat and Temperature discussion, page 151.

SHORT TIME EXPOSURE SAFETY FACTORS

This concept of summation of short-term effects and extrapolation is an approach which tests the applicability of present bioassay methodology and precision and may not be universally applicable to all types of discharges. Conservatism in application should be practiced. When developing the summation of short-term thermal effects data, a safety factor of two degrees centigrade is incorporated. In development of summation of short-term toxicity effects data, a safety factor exists if a conservative physiological or behavioral response is used with effective time of exposure. However, when mortality is the response plotted, an application factor must be incorporated to provide an adequate margin of safety. This factor can most easily be applied by lowering the sum of the additive effects to some fraction of 1 so that the sum of $T_1/(ET(x) \text{ at } C_1) \cdots + T_n/(ET(x) \text{ at } C_n)$ then equals 0.9, or less. The value must be based on scientific knowledge of the organism's behavior and response to the contaminants involved.

Recommendation

When developing summation of short-term exposure effects it is recommended that safety factors, application factors, or conservative physiological or behavioral responses be incorporated into the bioassay or extrapolation procedures to provide an adequate margin of safety.

OVERLAPPING MIXING ZONES

If mixing zones are contiguous or overlap, the formula expressing the integrated time exposure history for single plumes should be adjusted. Synergistic effects should be investigated, and if not found, the assumption may be made that effects of multiple plumes are additive.

Recommendation

When two plumes are contiguous or overlap and synergistic effects do not occur, protection for aquatic life should be provided if the sum of the fractions of integrated time exposure effects for each plume total ≤ 0.5. Alternatively, protection should be provided if the sum of the fractions for both plumes (or more than two contiguous or overlapping plumes) is ≤ 1. (See caveat above, Short Time Exposure Safety Factors.)

INTERIM GUIDELINE

In the event information on summation effects of the integrated time exposure history cannot be satisfactorily provided, a conservative single figure concentration can be used for all parts of the mixing zone until more detailed determinations of the time-exposure relationships are developed. This single, time-dependent median lethal concentration should be subject to the caveats found throughout this Section and Appendix II–A regarding delayed effects and behavioral modifications. Because of the variables involved, the single value must be applied in the light of local conditions. For one situation a 24-hour LC50 might be adequate to protect aquatic life. In another situation a 96-hour LC50 might provide inadequate protection.

CONFIGURATION AND LOCATION OF MIXING ZONES

The time-dependent three dimensional shape of a discharge plume varies with a multitude of receiving system physical factors and the discharge design. While time exposure water quality characteristics within mixing zones are designed to protect aquatic life, thoughtful placement of the discharge and planned control of plume behavior may increase the level of ecosystem protection, e.g., floating the plume on the surface to protect the deep water of a channel; discharging in midstream or offshore to protect biologically-important littoral areas; piping the effluent across a river to discharge on the far side because fish historically migrate on the near side; or piping the discharge away from a stream mouth which is used by migrating species. Such engineering modifications can sometimes accomplish what is necessary to meet biological requirements.

Onshore discharges generally have more potential for interference with other uses than offshore discharges. For example the plume is more liable to impinge on the bottom in shallow areas of biological productivity and be closer to swimming and recreation areas.

PROPORTIONAL RELATIONSHIP OF MIXING ZONES TO RECEIVING SYSTEMS

Recommendations for mixing zones do not protect against the long-term biological effects of sublethal conditions. Thus water quality requirements necessary to protect all life stages and necessary functions of aquatic organisms such as spawning and larval development, are not provided in mixing zones, and it is essential to insure that adequate portions of every water body are free of mixing zones. The decision as to what portion and areas must be retained at receiving water quality values is both a social and scientific decision. In reaching this decision, data input should include current and projected information on types and locations of intakes and discharges; percentage of shoreline necessary to provide adequate spawning, nursery, and feeding areas; and other desired uses of the water.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the total area or volume of a receiving system assigned to mixing zones be limited to that which will: (1) not interfere with biological communities or populations of important species to a degree which is damaging to the ecosystem; (2) not diminish other beneficial uses disproportionately.

ZONES OF PASSAGE

In river systems, reservoirs, lakes, estuaries, and coastal waters, zones of passage are continuous water routes of such volume, area, and quality as to allow passage of free-swimming and drifting organisms so that no significant effects are produced on their populations.

Transport of a variety of organisms in river water and by tidal movements in estuaries is biologically important in a number of ways; e.g., food is carried to the sessile filter feeders and other nonmobile organisms; spatial distribution of organisms and reinforcement of depauperate populations is enhanced; embryos and larvae of some fish species develop while drifting. Anadromous and catadromous species must be able to reach suitable spawning areas. Their young (and in some cases the adults) must be assured a return route to their growing and living areas. Many species make migrations for spawning and other purposes. Barriers or blocks which prevent or interfere with these types of essential transport and movement can be created by water of inadequate chemical or physical quality.

Water quality in the zone of passage should be such that biological responses to the water quality characteristics of the mixing zone are no longer time-dependent (see Definition of Mixing Zone on page 112). However, where a zone of passage is to be provided, bioassays determining time-exposure responses in the mixing zone should include additional requirements to assess organism behavior. In the mixing zone discussion above it is assumed that entrainment in the plume will be involuntary. However, if there is attraction due to plume composition, exposure in the plume could be very much longer than would be predicted by physical modeling. If avoidance reactions occur, migration may be thwarted. Thus, concentrations in both the mixing zone and the zone of passage should be reduced before discharge to levels below those at which such behavioral modifications affect the populations of the subject organisms.

Modern techniques of waste water injection such as diffusers and high velocity jets may form barriers to free passage due to responses of organisms to currents. Turbulence of flows opposing stream direction may create traps for those organisms which migrate upstream by orientation to opposing currents. These organisms may remain in the mixing zone in response to currents created by the discharge.

Recommendation

Because of varying local physical and chemical conditions and biological phenomena, no single-value recommendation can be made on the percentage of river width necessary to allow passage of critical free-swimming and drifting organisms so that negligible or no effects are produced on their populations. As a guideline no more than ⅔ the width of a water-body should be devoted to mixing zones thus leaving at least ⅓ free as a zone of passage.

lation is more rapid, the system will reach steady-state more quickly, but the concentration for a given rate of addition will be less. If the material is not persistent, the rate of decomposition may be more important than circulation in determining the steady-state concentration. If the products of decomposition are persistent, however, these will accumulate to levels greater than those in the original discharge. Local concentrations, such as can be found in the deeper waters of stratified systems or in trapping embayments, may be more significant than the average concentration for the whole system. In short, the recommendations cannot be used to determine the permissible amount of a pollutant to be added or a rate of addition without detailed knowledge of the specific system which is to receive the waste.

Mixing Zones

When a liquid discharge is made to a receiving system, a zone of mixing is created. In the past, these zones have frequently been approved as sites of accepted loss, exempted from the water quality standard for the receiving water. Physical description, biological assessment, and management of such zones have posed many difficult problems. The following discussion deals with criteria for assuring that no significant damage to marine aquatic life occurs in such mixing zones. Although recent public, administrative, and scientific emphasis has focused on mixing zones for the dispersion of waste heat, other uses of the mixing zone concept are also included in these considerations.

Definition of a Mixing Zone A mixing zone is a region in which an effluent is in transit from the outfall source of the receiving waters. The effluent is progressively diluted, but its concentration is higher than in the receiving waters.

Approach to the Recommendation Mixing zones must be considered on a case-by-case basis because each proposed site involves a unique set of pertinent considerations. These include the nature, quantity, and concentration of the effluent material; the physical, chemical and biological characteristics of the mixing area and receiving waters; and the desired uses of the waters. However, the following general recommendation can be established for the purpose of protecting aquatic life in areas where effluents are mixing with receiving waters:

> *The total time-toxicity exposure history must not cause deleterious effects in affected populations of important species, including the post-exposure effects.*

Meeting the Recommendation Special circumstances distinguish the mixing zone from the receiving waters. In the zone, the duration of exposure to an effluent may be quite brief, and it is usually substantially shorter than in the receiving waters, so that assays involving long periods of exposure are not as helpful in predicting damage. In addition, the concentration of effluent is higher than in receiving waters. Therefore, the development of specific requirements for a specific mixing zone must be based upon the probable duration of the esposure of organisms to the effluent as well as on the toxicity of the pollutant.

The recommendation can be met in two ways: use of a probably-safe concentration requirement for all parts of the mixing zone; or accurate determination of the real concentrations and duration of exposures for important species and good evidence that this time-toxicity exposure is not deleterious. The latter, more precise approach to meeting the recommentation will require:

- determination of the pattern of exposure of important species to the effluent in terms of time and concentration in the mixing zone;
- establishment of the summed effects on important species;
- determination that deleterious effects do not occur.

Complexities in the Marine Environment Some of the problems involved in protecting marine aquatic life are similar to those in lacustrine and fluvial fresh waters and, in general, the recommendations in Section III, pp. 112–115 are applicable to marine situations. There are, however, special complexities in evaluating mixing zones in coastal and oceanic waters. These include:

- the exceptional importance of sessile species, especially in estuaries and near shore, where effluents originate;
- the presence of almost all species in the plankton at some stage in the life history of each, so that they may be entrained in the diluting waters;
- obligate seasonal migrations by many fish and some invertebrates;
- oscillation in tidal currents, mixing mechanisms and in resulting concentrations, dilution rates, and dispersion patterns.

None of these affect the general recommendation, but they do contribute to the difficulty of applying it.

Theoretical Approach to Meeting the Recommendation Any measure of detrimental effects of a given concentration of a waste component on aquatic or marine organisms is dependent upon the time of exposure to that waste concentration, at least over some restricted but definable period of time. For a given species and substance, under a given set of environmental conditions, there will be some critical concentration below which a particular measure of detrimental effects will not be observed, regardless of the duration of exposure. Above the critical concentration, the detrimental effects will be observed if the exposure time is sufficiently long. The greater the concentration of the substance, the shorter the time of exposure to cause a specified degree of damage. The water quality characteristics for mixing zones are defined so that the organisms to be protected will be carried or move through the