EQC Meeting April 15-16, 2015

Director’s Dialogue

A Citizen Request to Designate the NF Smith River an

Outstanding Resource Water

DEQ Director and Commission Chair Jane O’Keefe received a letter (dated Feb. 2, 2015) from 16 citizens requesting that the Commission designate the North Fork Smith River an Outstanding Resource Water, as allowed by Oregon’s antidegradation policy. Because the NF Smith River flows south into California, a similar request was made to the California North Coast Water Quality Control Board. The letter did not constitute a formal petition to the EQC for rulemaking.

According to the request letter, the NF Smith River has many attributes that indicate it would qualify as an Outstanding Resource Water. It is undeveloped, supports salmon and steelhead, and was added to the National Wild and Scenic River system in 1988. The signers of the letter are concerned that a proposed nickel strip mine, now under review by the US Forest Service, would degrade the extraordinary water quality and values of this river.

The Commission may designate waters that constitute “an outstanding state or national resource” as Outstanding Resource Waters in order to protect the special water quality values of the water body. The existing water quality vital to the unique character of the water body must then be maintained and protected. The Commission may establish the level of water quality to be protected and may determine what activities are not allowed because they may lower water quality. To date, Oregon has not designated any Outstanding Resource Waters.

DEQ recommends that it consider the proposal to designate the NF Smith River, and possibly other water bodies, as Outstanding Resource Waters during the upcoming Triennial Review, which will begin this year. During the triennial review, staff will prioritize water quality standards work considering program needs, available data and staff resources. DEQ also recommends that we coordinate and share information with the state of California.