

# **CANADA – BRITISH COLUMBIA**

## **WATER QUALITY MONITORING AGREEMENT**

### **WATER QUALITY ASSESSMENT OF SIMILKAMEEN RIVER AT US BORDER (1976 – 2000)**

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March, 2002



**Environment  
Canada**

**Environnement  
Canada**



**Ministry of  
Environment**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

There have been three long-term water quality monitoring stations on the Similkameen River: near the US Border, at Princeton, and at Hedley (Figure 1). This report focuses on the water quality at the site on the Similkameen River near the US Border. The Similkameen River water is used for irrigation, livestock watering, drinking, primary and secondary-contact recreation, and industrial use, and sustains aquatic life and wildlife.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

- Values in excess of water quality guidelines for metals such as aluminum, arsenic, cadmium, cobalt, copper, iron, manganese, and zinc were likely a result of occasional high concentrations of particulate matter (as evidenced by high turbidity levels). This means that these metals were probably not bio-available and would be removed by the treatment needed before use as drinking water.
- The Similkameen River had a low sensitivity to acid inputs (was relatively well-buffered), as evidenced by relatively high calcium concentrations. True colour values frequently exceeded the drinking water guideline at this site
- Detection limits used to analyze metals such as cadmium and silver were too high to accurately assess these metals in comparison to the appropriate water quality guideline. In addition, laboratory problems with cadmium prior to August 2000 render data collected before this time unreliable. Different methods should be employed in the future to allow these data to be compared to water quality guidelines.
- Weak-acid dissociable cyanide concentrations exceeded the average aquatic life guideline on only one occasion, and did not exceed the maximum guideline. Strong-acid dissociable cyanide concentrations were well below guideline levels.
- Fluoride concentrations occasionally exceeded the aquatic life guidelines.
- The Similkameen River had moderate hardness, with concentrations generally within the optimum drinking water range.

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- Water temperatures exceeded the aesthetic drinking water guideline and the general fisheries guideline most years.
- Turbidity values were frequently above guideline levels for drinking water (both aesthetic and health).

### **MONITORING RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Monitoring should continue at the Similkameen River near the US Border, and at the upstream control station, Princeton. The site near the US Border is both a trans-border station and is downstream of the largest number of industrial waste discharges to the Similkameen River.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The headwaters of the Similkameen River are in the Cascade Mountains. The river flows north-easterly through Manning Park to Princeton, and then south-easterly until it crosses the International Boundary just south from Cawston (Figure 1). The river enters the Okanagan River downstream from Osoyoos Lake in Washington State. There are four major population centres (Princeton, Hedley, Keremeos and Cawston) within the watershed. The area of the Canadian portion of the drainage basin is about 9,190 km<sup>2</sup> (Environment Canada, 1991).

The main potential human influences on water quality include: treated municipal sewage from the Princeton and Keremeos; a copper mine on Wolfe Creek, which drains to the Similkameen River between Princeton and Hedley; a gold mine on Cahill Creek, which drains to the Similkameen River downstream from Hedley; old mines in the Hedley area, agriculture (primarily cattle production), and forestry.

There are three long-term water quality monitoring sites on the Similkameen River; at Princeton, above Hedley, and near the US Border. This report focuses on the water quality at the Chopaka Bridge Site near the US Border.

Similkameen River water is used for irrigation, drinking, livestock watering, primary and secondary-contact recreation, and industrial use, and sustains aquatic life and wildlife.

This report assesses results from bi-weekly samples collected by Environment Canada from 1979 to 2000 at the Similkameen River near the US Border. The federal site number is BC08NL0005 and the provincial station number is 0500073 (B.C. Environment collected data during 1983-2000). This site is located at 49° 04' 46" N: 119° 42' 28" W and continues to be monitored jointly by Canada and B.C. Flow is plotted in Figure 2, and water quality data are plotted in Figures 3 to 39.

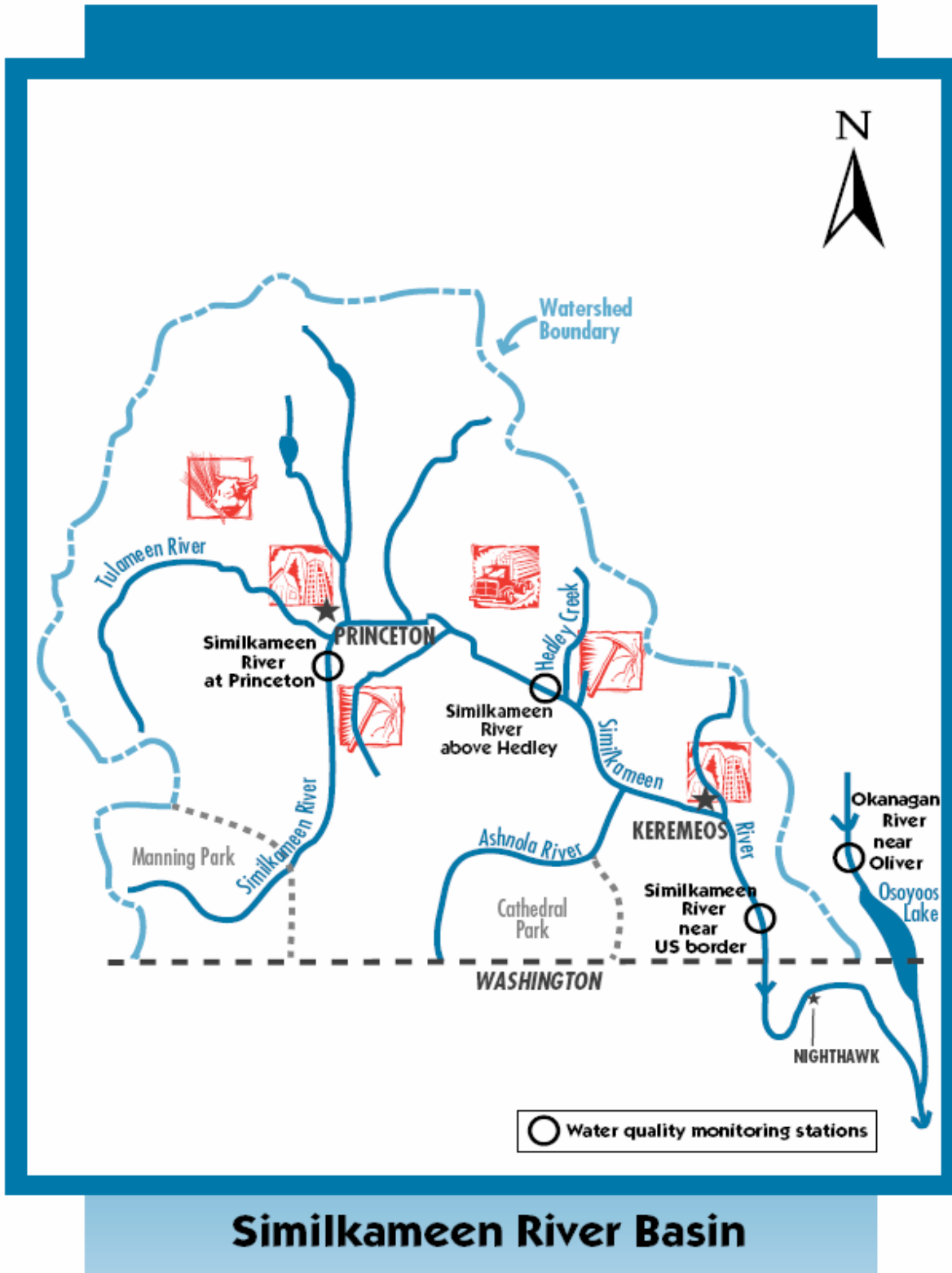


FIGURE 1. MAP OF THE SIMILKAMEEN RIVER BASIN

## QUALITY ASSURANCE

The water quality graphs were inspected and erroneous values were removed. There were erroneous results for water temperature and total dissolved nitrogen. Chromium, copper, lead, zinc, and cyanide had high values between the start of 1986 and end of 1990. These high values likely reflect contamination that was caused by the breakdown of preservative vial liners and lids. The 1986-90 data for these variables was not used in this assessment. Environment Canada reported low pH values between 1986 and 1988 due to laboratory problems; provincial data were used to supplement the data in this time period. Mercury data were not included in the report because all detectable values are believed to result from contamination during the collection and measurement process (Pommen, 1994). Quality assurance issues are expanded upon in the next section.

## STATE OF THE WATER QUALITY

The state of the water quality was judged by comparing values to Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks' Approved and Working Guidelines for Water Quality (Nagpal *et al.*, 1997) or to site-specific water quality objectives. The following water quality objectives for the Similkameen River between Princeton and the International Boundary, outlined by Swain (1990), were used in this report:

- fecal coliforms should not exceed 10 CFU/100 mL in 90% of at least five samples taken weekly in a period of 30 days;
- maximum turbidity should not exceed an increase of 1 NTU (upstream < 5 NTU), 5 NTU (upstream < 50 NTU), or 10% (upstream > 50 NTU);
- weak -acid dissociable cyanide ( $\text{CN}^-$ ) should not exceed a maximum of 0.01 mg/L and an average of 0.005 mg/L;
- maximum strong-acid dissociable cyanide plus thiocyanate ( $\text{CN}^-$ ) should not exceed 0.2 mg/L;
- total arsenic should not exceed a maximum of 0.05 mg/L, or no significant increase from upstream if upstream > 0.05 mg/L (Note: since this objective was set in 1990, the drinking water guideline has been reduced to 0.025 mg/L and the aquatic life guideline has been reduced to 0.005 mg/L, indicating that the objective may be too high);



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- average total ammonia-N should not exceed a level that would be detrimental to aquatic life. The screening level chosen for this report (0.28 mg/L) is based on a "worst-case scenario" by using the highest pH (8.4) and temperature (22 °C) values reported at this site;
- Dissolved oxygen should be greater than the minimum of:
  - 11.0 mg/L (April to June),
  - 8 mg/L (July to March);
- pH values should be within the range of 6.5-8.5 or within a 0.2 unit change if background is outside this range;
- dissolved aluminum should not exceed a maximum of 0.1 mg/L and an average of 0.05 mg/L or no significant increase over upstream if upstream values are greater;
- total chromium should not exceed an average of 0.002 mg/L and a maximum of 0.02 mg/L, or no significant increase from upstream if upstream values are greater than above;
- total copper should not exceed an average of 0.04 (hardness in mg/L) micrograms/L or 2 micrograms /L if hardness is  $\leq 50$  mg/L, and a maximum of 0.094 (hardness in mg/L) +2 micrograms /L, or no significant increase from upstream if upstream values are greater than above. For the hardness range of 30 to 120 mg/L, this gives an average of 0.002 - 0.0048 mg/L and a maximum of 0.0048 - 0.0133 mg/L;
- total iron should not exceed 0.3 mg/L or no significant increase from upstream if upstream values are greater than above;
- total lead should not exceed  $3.31 + \exp. [1.273 \ln (\text{average hardness in mg/L}) - 4.705]$  micrograms /L average and a maximum of  $\exp. [1.273 \ln (\text{hardness in mg/L}) - 1.460]$  micrograms /L, or no significant increase from upstream if upstream values are greater than above. For the hardness range of 30 to 120, this gives an average of 0.004 - 0.0073 mg/L and a maximum of 0.014 0 0.103 mg/L;
- total manganese should not exceed 0.05 mg/L or no significant increase from upstream if upstream is  $>0.05$  mg/L;
- total molybdenum should not exceed a maximum of 0.05 mg/L and an average of 0.01 mg/L in samples collected between May and September;
- total nickel should not exceed a maximum of 0.025 mg/L when hardness  $\leq 65$  mg/L, 0.065 mg/L when hardness  $>65$  mg/L, or no significant increase over background; and

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- total zinc should not exceed an average of 0.01 mg/L and a maximum of 0.03 mg/L, or no significant increase from upstream if upstream values are greater than above.

Variables plotted but not mentioned in the discussion below showed no clear trends over time and met all guidelines. These variables were: total barium, total beryllium, total boron, dissolved organic carbon, specific conductivity, total lithium, magnesium, total molybdenum, total nickel, nitrogen, total dissolved phosphorus, total phosphorus, potassium, total selenium, total silver, total thallium, total uranium, and total vanadium.

**Flow** (Figure 2) during snowmelt freshet (April-July) was highest in 1986 and 1991, and lowest in 1992 and 1994. A set of secondary peaks due to rains occurred in the fall of most years, especially 1989, 1990 and 1995. Flow should continue to be measured due to its importance in interpreting water quality indicators and calculating loadings.

**Total alkalinity and calcium** (Figure 9) concentrations are both relatively high in the Similkameen River, indicating a low sensitivity to acid inputs (the river was well buffered). Concentrations of both dissolved and extractable calcium ranged from 8 mg/L to 38 mg/L, generally well above the 8 mg/L threshold for waters sensitive to acid inputs. Both alkalinity and calcium concentrations varied seasonally, with dilution from high spring freshet flows resulting in lower concentrations between April and July and higher concentrations occurring in the fall and winter months, during low flows.

**Total aluminum** (Figure 3) values met the guideline for wildlife, livestock and irrigation (5 mg/L) in all but five of the 301 samples collected between 1990 and 2000 (Figure 3). These values all occurred in early spring (April and May) in 1991, 1997, 1999 and 2000, during high flow periods. Figure 3 shows that peak total aluminum and peak turbidity values were very well correlated. This indicates that the aluminum likely was in a particulate form and probably not biologically available. While dissolved aluminum concentrations were not measured, 171 samples (57%) had total aluminum concentrations higher than the 0.05 mg/L **dissolved** aluminum aquatic life guideline, and 93 samples (31%) had total aluminum concentrations exceeding the 0.2 mg/L

**dissolved** aluminum guideline for drinking water. Dissolved aluminum should be measured in the future to allow these guidelines to be evaluated.

The maximum water quality objective proposed for **total arsenic** (Figure 4) concentrations in the Similkameen River is 0.05 mg/L. However, modifications to the arsenic guidelines in 2001 set threshold levels at 0.005 mg/L for aquatic life, 0.025 mg/L for drinking water, livestock watering and wildlife, and 0.1 mg/L for irrigation. Total arsenic concentrations ranged from a minimum of 0.0001 mg/L to a maximum of 0.0425 mg/L for 464 values measured between 1979 and 2000 (Figure 4). The maximum value occurred in May of 1991, during peak flows, and there is an excellent correlation between turbidity and maximum arsenic values. This indicates that the majority of arsenic is associated with particulate matter when it is present in higher concentrations. Concentrations of extractable measured between 1980 and 1984 exceeded the aquatic life guideline on three occasions, and exceeded the drinking water guideline on one occasion. Metals associated with particulate matter generally are much less toxic than metals in the dissolved form. 21 values (4.5% of samples) exceeded the aquatic life guideline, and 2 values (0.4% of samples) exceeded the drinking water guideline. None of the samples had total arsenic concentrations higher than the irrigation guideline.

**Total cadmium** (Figure 8) values may have been high between 1986 and 1990 due to preservative vial contamination. Since that time, 12% of the total cadmium values (33 of 275 samples collected between 1991 and 2000) were greater than the minimum detectable limit (0.0001 mg/L) and therefore exceeded the aquatic life guideline of 0.00001 mg/L (Figure 8). These values occurred at times of high turbidity, indicating that the cadmium was in particulate form and was probably not biologically available. Extractable cadmium concentrations measured between 1997 and 2000 support this theory, with only 2 of 105 samples exceeding the minimum detectable limit. The minimum detectable limits were between 10 and 100 times greater than the guideline, making it impossible to interpret values reported at or below the detectable limits with regards to the aquatic life guideline. To evaluate the attainment of guidelines for aquatic life accurately, the minimum detectable limit should be at least one-tenth of the guideline value.

**Total chromium** (Figure 11) concentrations measured prior to mid-2000 were suspect due to poor correlations between total and extractable results, resulting from instrument interference (Ryan, 2002 pers. comm.). For this reason, chromium concentrations will not be discussed in this report. As the problem was rectified in about August 2000, it is hoped that future data will give a more accurate picture of chromium concentrations in the Similkameen River.

**Total cobalt** (Figure 12) was measured 294 times between 1990 and 2000, with values ranging from below detectable limits ( $<0.0001$  mg/L) to a maximum of 0.0115 mg/L. 51 samples (17%) collected during this period exceeded the guideline for protection of aquatic life (0.0009 mg/L) (Figure 12). The peaks in cobalt occurred at the same time as peaks in turbidity, indicating that the cobalt likely was in particulate form and may not have been biologically available. None of the values exceeded the irrigation guideline of 0.05 mg/L. No trend in cobalt concentrations was obvious.

**Fecal coliform** (Figure 13) values were collected sporadically between 1984 and 1993, as well as in 2000. While sampling frequency was insufficient to determine guideline compliance (a minimum of five samples in a 30-day period are required), 22% of values (41 of 188 samples collected) exceeded the guideline of 10 CFU/100 mL for drinking water that undergoes disinfection only prior to consumption (Figure 13). Values ranged from below detectable limits ( $<1$  or  $<2$  CFU/100 mL) to a maximum of 20,000 CFU/100 mL. It appears that fecal coliform concentrations likely do not meet the guideline for drinking water. More frequent monitoring (at least 5 to 10 samples in 30 days) is required to evaluate attainment of the objective.

**True colour** (Figure 14) was measured 122 times between 1972 and 2000 (primarily between 1972 and 1978, and between 1997 and 2000). 16% of values (20 samples) exceeded the aesthetic drinking water guideline of 15 TCU, primarily during spring freshet (Figure 14).

**Total copper** (Figure 16) values near the US Border were very high and are considered unreliable between 1986 and 1990 due to contamination from preservative vial lids. Aquatic life guidelines for total copper are hardness-dependent: at hardness levels typical for the Similkameen River upstream from the U/S Border, these would typically be a maximum of 0.008 mg/L, and a 30-day

average of about 0.003 mg/L. By calculating maximum and average guidelines for each of the 275 samples collected between 1991 and 2000 based on their concurrent hardness concentrations, it was determined that 33 values (12% of all samples) exceeded their appropriate maximum guideline, while 68 samples (25%) exceeded the 30-day average guideline (Figure 16). This comparison is used only as an indication of potential exceedances, because the calculation of a 30-day average requires a minimum of 5 samples collected within a 30-day period (a criterion not met in this instance). There was a good correlation between elevated copper and elevated turbidity levels (Figure 16), suggesting that copper was often associated with particulate matter and therefore not likely biologically available. However, extractable copper concentrations measured between 1997 and 2000 also occasionally exceeded both the maximum and average guidelines, suggesting that aquatic life may be impaired by this metal. Again, all exceedances occurred during high water flows in the spring and early summer. There was no apparent change over time.

**Total cyanide** and **weak-acid dissociable cyanide (WAD)** (Figure 18) values were high and unreliable between 1987 and 1990 probably due to contamination from preservative vial lids. Between 1992 and 2000, only one of 283 samples collected at this site (0.0067 mg/L, measured on May 20, 1993) exceeded the 30-day average objective (0.005 mg/L) for aquatic life (Figure 18). The maximum objective of 0.01 mg/L was not exceeded by any samples. 182 of the 2283 samples collected between 1991 and 2000 had concentrations below the detectable limits (< 0.0005 mg/L). **Cyanide (SAD) + thiocyanate** concentrations were well below guideline levels (0.2 mg/L) (Figure 17).

**Dissolved fluoride** concentrations ranged from 0.02 mg/L to 0.95 mg/L for 406 samples collected between 1980 and 2000. Four values (1% of samples) exceeded the 0.3 mg/L aquatic life guideline for dissolved fluoride (Figure 19).

**Hardness** (Figure 20) values ranged from 25 mg/L to a maximum of 121 mg/L for 542 samples collected between 1972 and 2000 (Figure 20). The average for these 542 values was 75 mg/L. Hardness was often within the optimum drinking water range (60 to 80 mg/L). Hardness can affect the toxicity of a number of metals, and should therefore continue to be monitored in the future. There was no apparent trend in hardness concentrations.

**Total iron** concentrations ranged from 0.006 mg/L to a maximum of 29 mg/L for 480 samples collected between 1974 and 2000 (Figure 21). 24% of values (115 of the 480 samples) exceeded the aesthetic drinking water guideline of 0.3 mg/L, and 3% (12 samples) exceeded the irrigation guideline of 5 mg/L. There was a strong correlation between total iron concentrations and turbidity levels (Figure 21), suggesting that at times when iron concentrations were high, it was likely primarily in the form of particulate matter and therefore not biologically available. There was no apparent trend in iron concentrations.

**Total lead** (Figure 22) values may have been high due to suspected preservative vial contamination between 1986 and 1990. Lead toxicity is hardness dependent, and therefore guideline levels are based on the water hardness. At an average hardness of 75 mg/L, the maximum aquatic life guideline is 0.056 mg/L, and the average 30-day guideline is 0.0055 mg/L. None of the 275 total lead concentrations measured between 1991 and 2000 exceeded the maximum guideline, and only three values exceeded the average guideline. As the minimum sampling frequency (at least five samples in 30-days) was not met, the average guideline cannot be assessed, but it would appear, based on the lower sampling frequencies available, that the average guideline would not be exceeded. There was no apparent trend in total lead concentrations.

**Total manganese** concentrations ranged from 0.0002 mg/L to 0.583 mg/L for 481 samples collected between 1974 and 2000 (Figure 25). The most stringent water quality guidelines for manganese apply to drinking water (a maximum of 0.05 mg/L) and aquatic life (a maximum of 0.7 mg/L). The drinking water guideline was exceeded 34 times (7% of samples), while the aquatic life guideline was never exceeded. The relationship between total manganese and turbidity (Figure 25) suggests that, during periods of high manganese concentrations, the majority was associated with particulate matter and therefore not likely bio-available.

**pH** values were generally within the aesthetic drinking water range (6.5 to 8.5 pH units), although there were a few values both higher and lower than this optimum range (Figure 29). The maximum recorded pH was 8.8, while the minimum was 6.2. There was no apparent trend in pH at this site.

**Water temperature** was measured a total of 602 times between 1972 and 2000, with a maximum recorded temperature of 23 degrees Celsius (Figure 34). The aesthetic drinking water guideline was exceeded most summers, and 105 values (52% of the 203 samples collected between June and September) exceeded this guideline. In addition, 22 values (17% of summer values) exceeded the general fisheries guideline of 19 degrees Celsius. Summer temperatures may be increasing slightly over time, although the inconsistency of the sampling schedule over the period of record makes this difficult to verify.

**Turbidity** values ranged from 0.06 NTU to a maximum of 300 NTU for 587 samples collected between 1972 and 2000 (Figure 36). 244 of these samples (42%) exceeded the health drinking water guideline of 1 NTU, while 85 values (15%) exceeded the aesthetic drinking water guideline of 5 NTU. Trends in turbidity values were seasonal in nature, with the majority of the highest values occurring during spring freshet. Other higher values, especially in the fall, were likely a result of rain events in the watershed, washing debris and silt into the river. These regular exceedances of the guidelines indicate that treatment (e.g. filtration) is necessary to remove suspended sediments prior to consumption of this water.

**Total zinc** (Figure 39) values were high due to suspected preservative vial contamination between 1986 and 1990. Freshwater aquatic life guidelines are hardness dependent: at hardness values typical for the Similkameen River, the average guideline is 0.035 mg/L, while the maximum guideline is about 0.010 mg/L. Since 1990, three values (1% of the 272 samples) exceeded the maximum objective, while sixteen values (6% of samples) exceeded the average objective (Figure 39). There was a good correlation between elevated zinc levels and elevated turbidity (Figure 39), suggesting that the zinc was associated with particulate matter and not likely bioavailable. However, the fact that extractable zinc concentrations also exceeded the guidelines on these occasions suggests that zinc may occasionally be a problem in the Similkameen River. There does not appear to be any trend in zinc concentrations over time at this site.

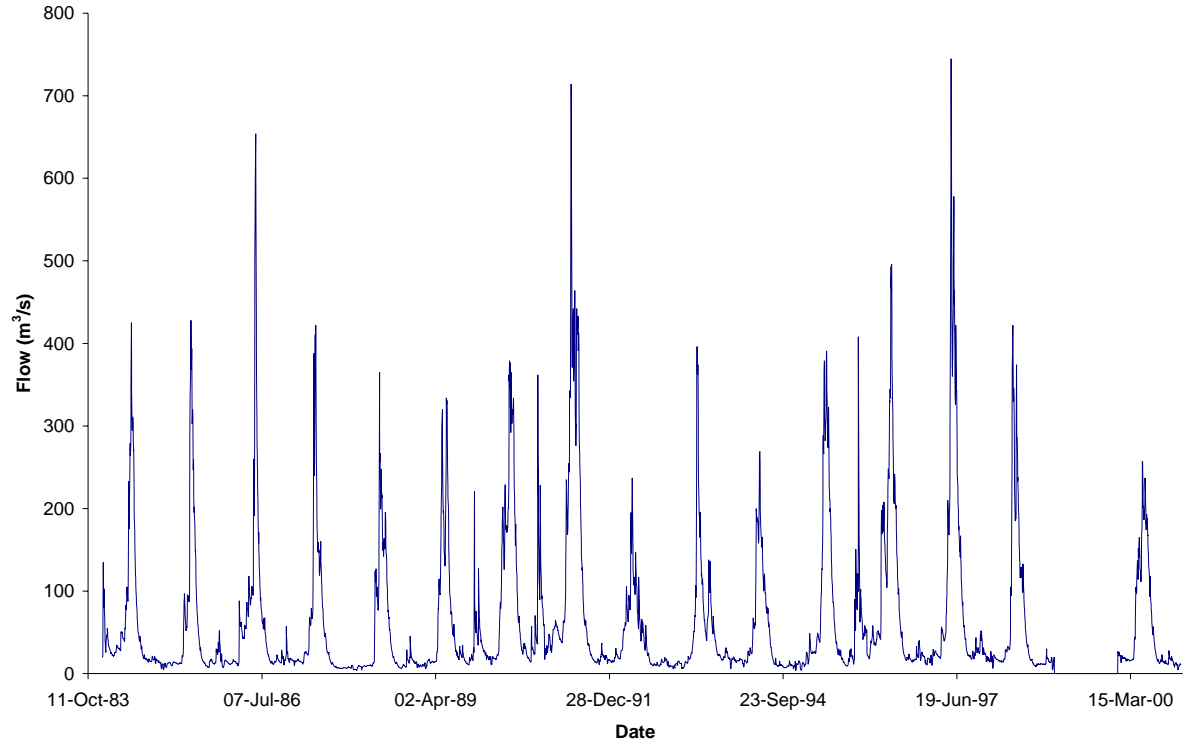
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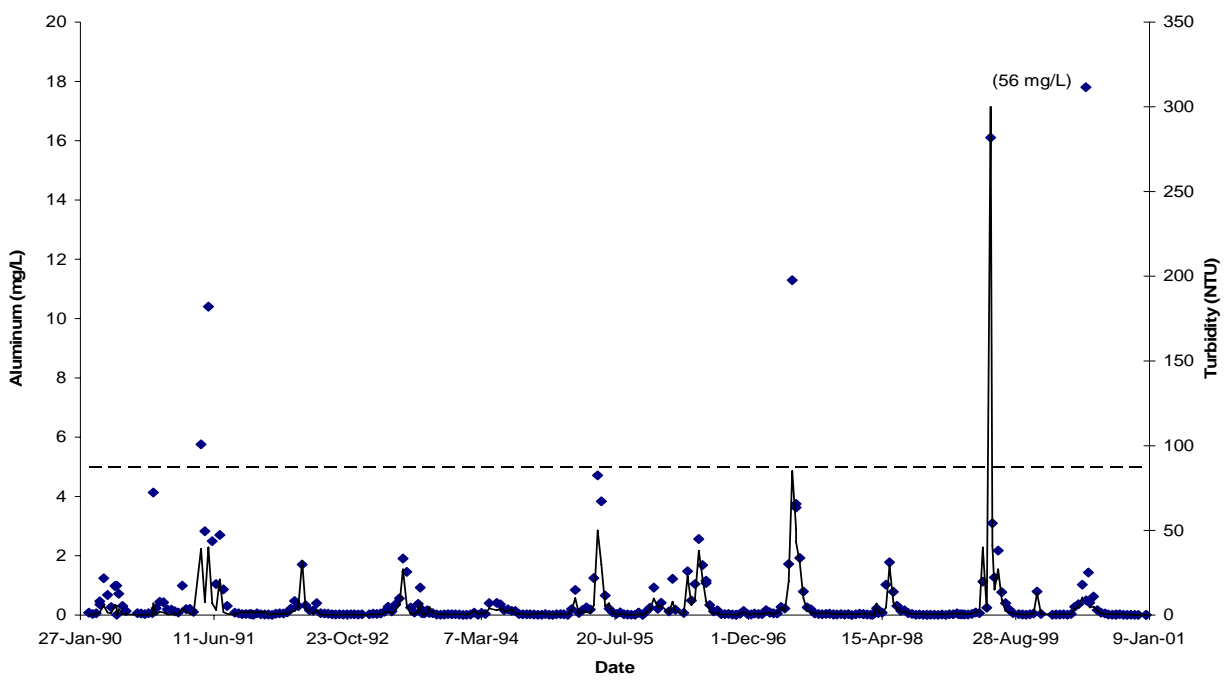


# Water Quality Assessment of the Similkameen River at U.S. Border (1976-2000)

**Figure 2. Hydrometric Record for Similkameen River Near US Border (WSC Site BC08NL022), 1984 - 2000**

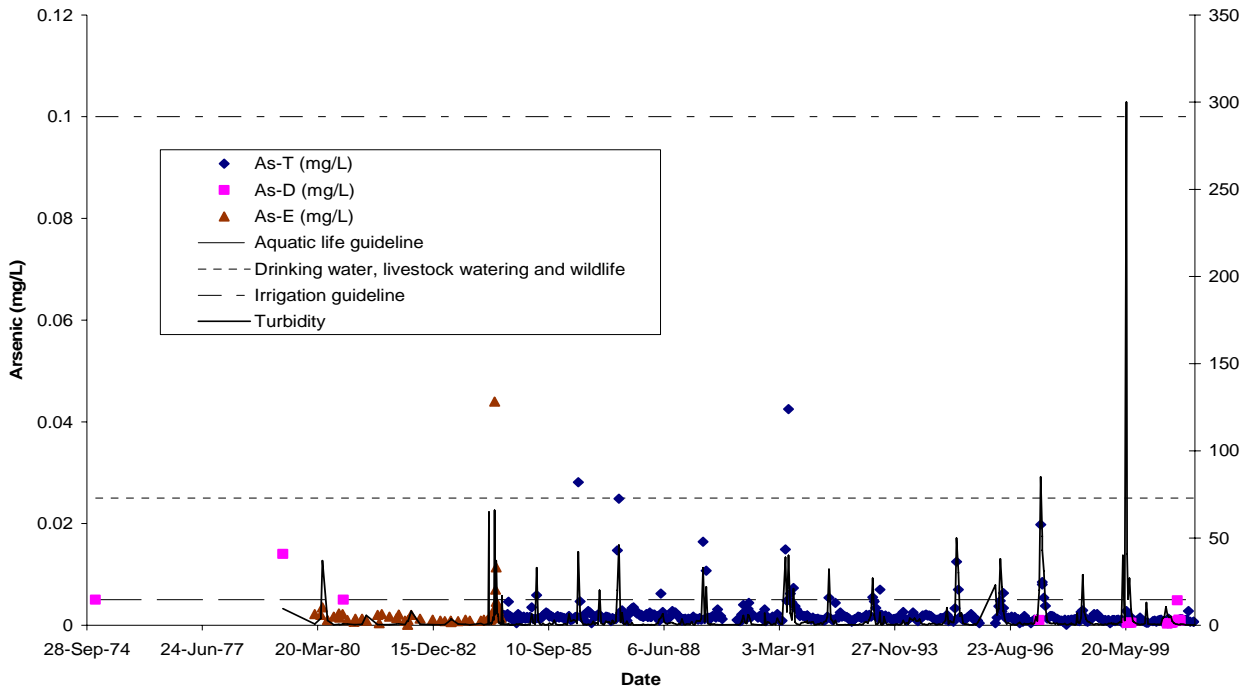


**Figure 3. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Aluminum**



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**Figure 4. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Arsenic**



**Figure 5. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Barium**

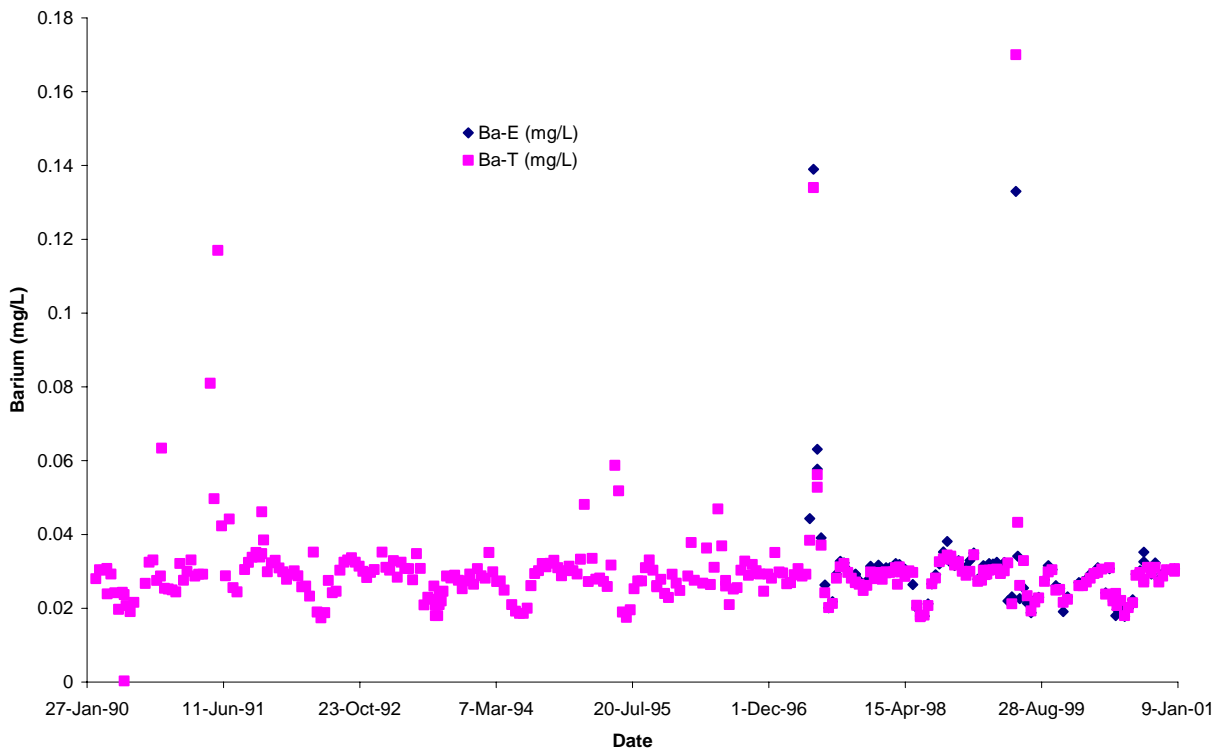


Figure 6. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Beryllium

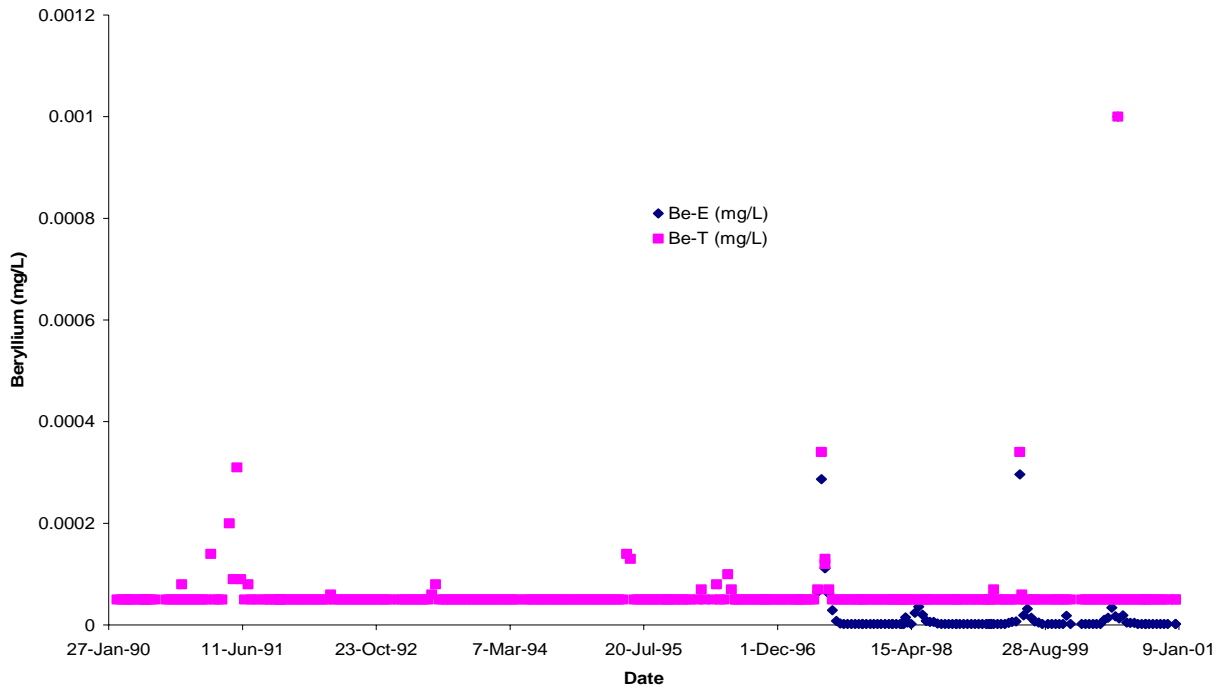


Figure 7. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Boron

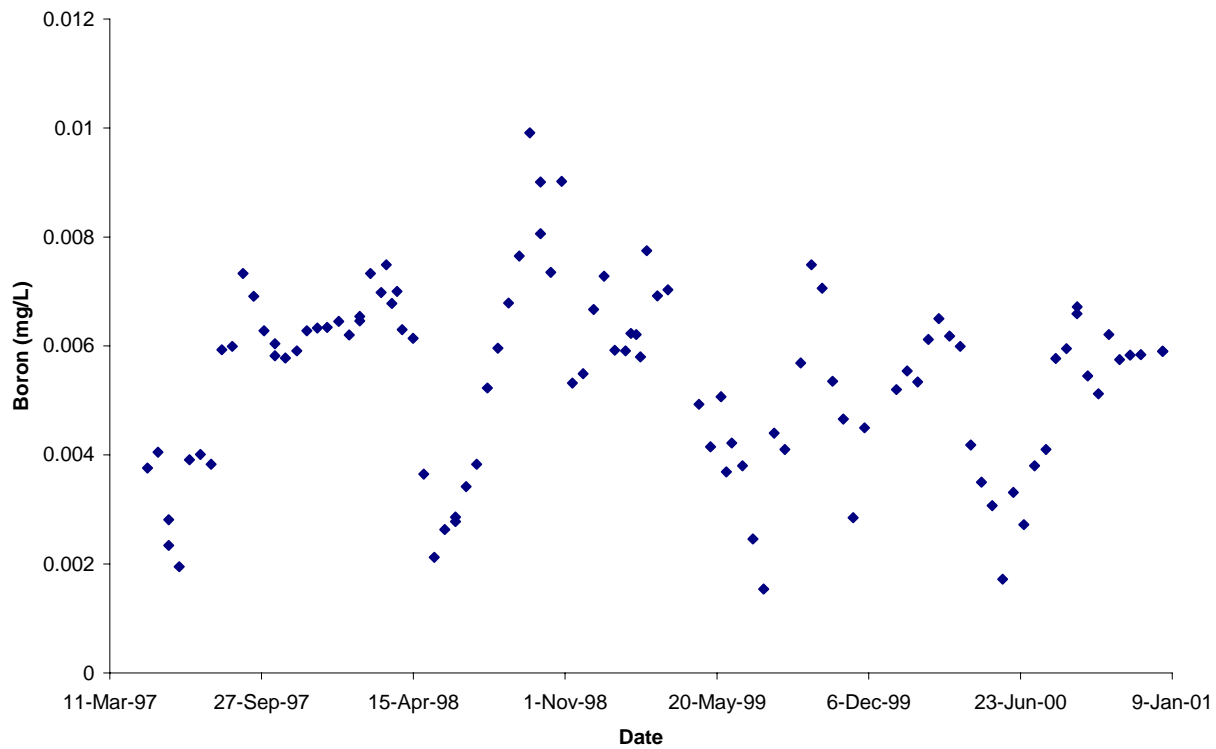


Figure 8. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Cadmium

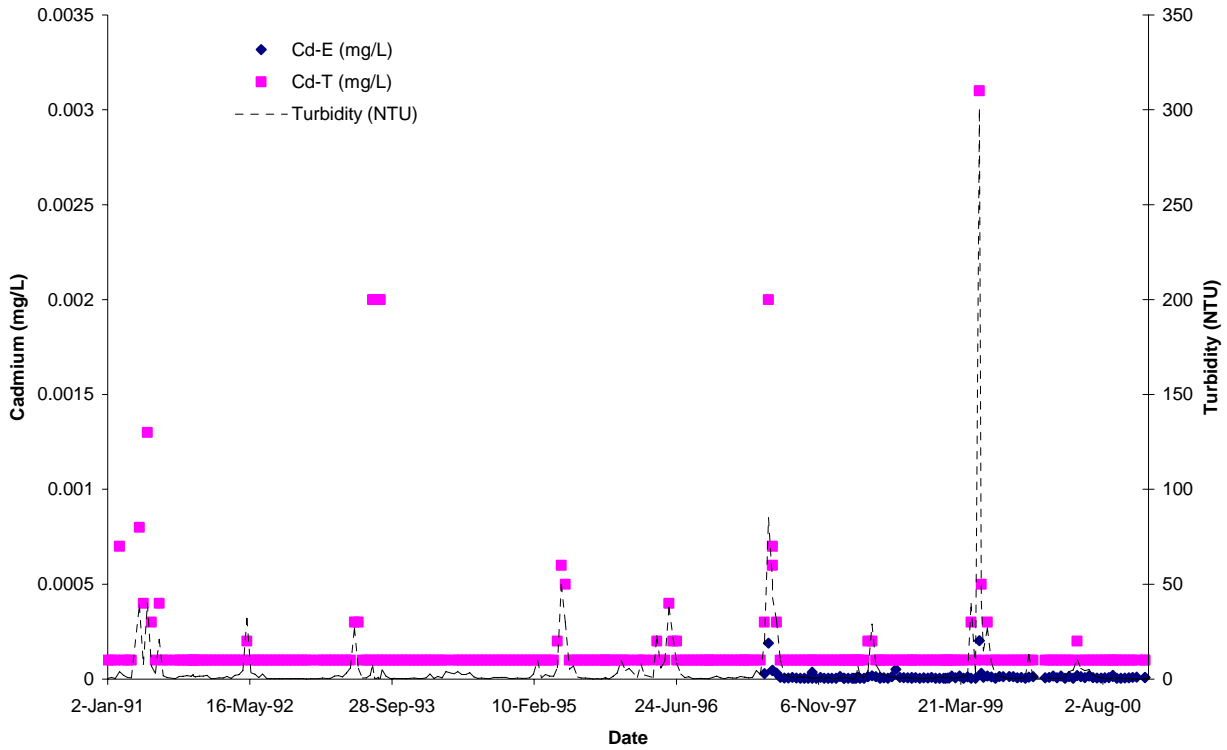


Figure 9. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Calcium

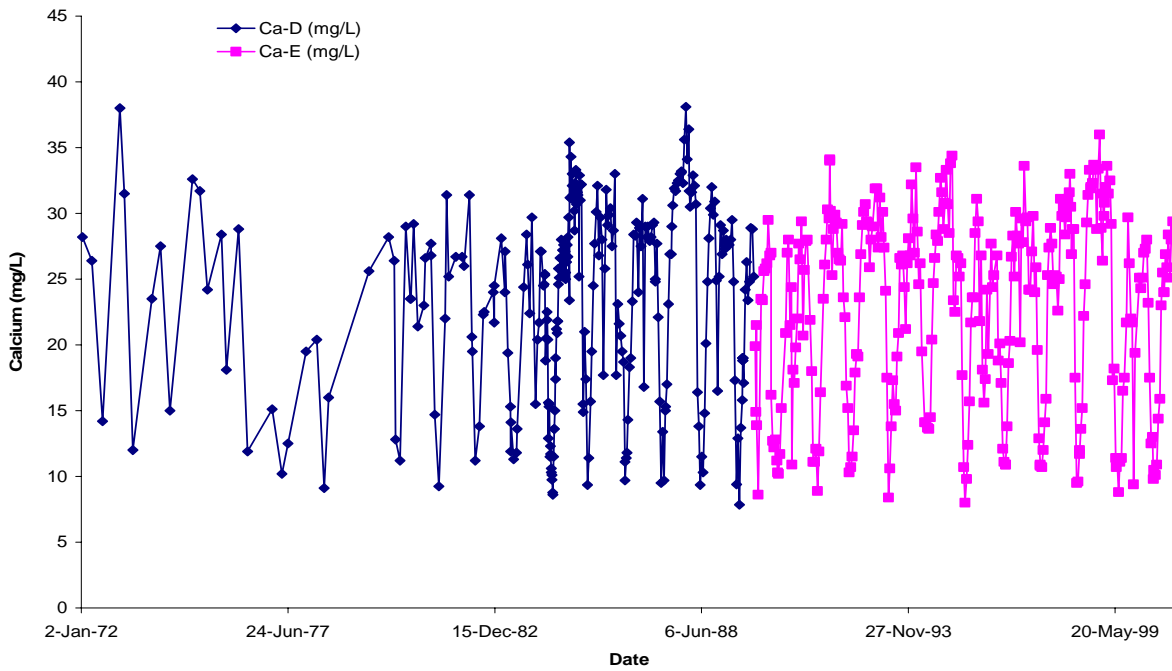


Figure 10. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Carbon, Dissolved Organic

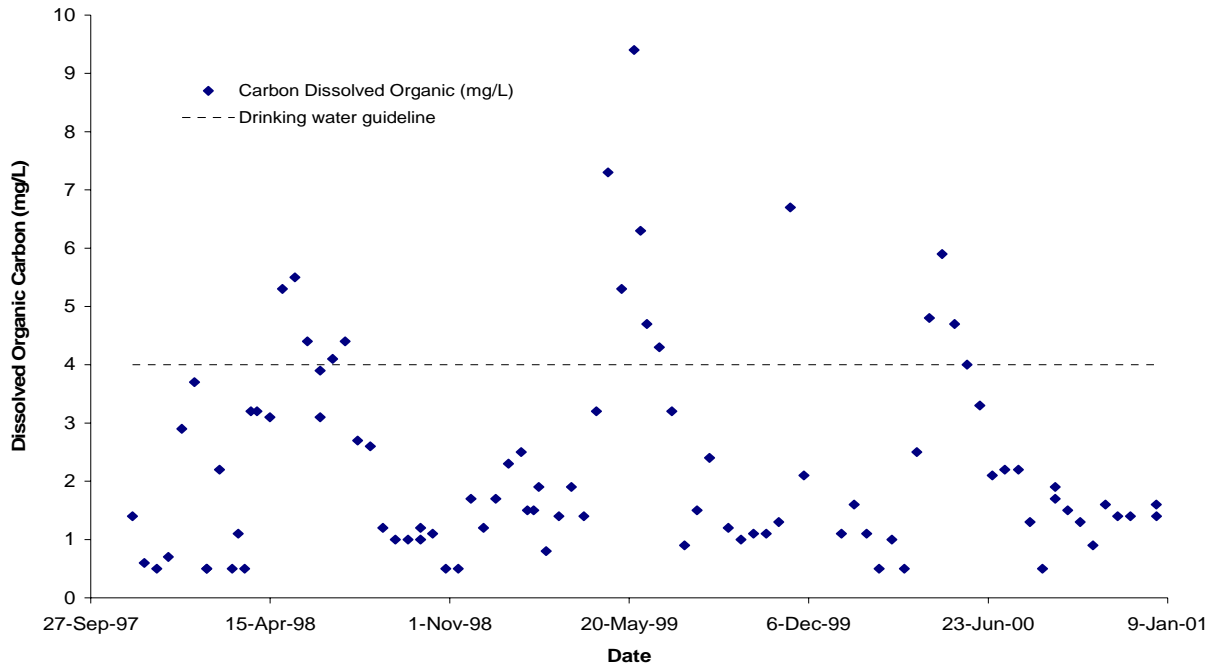
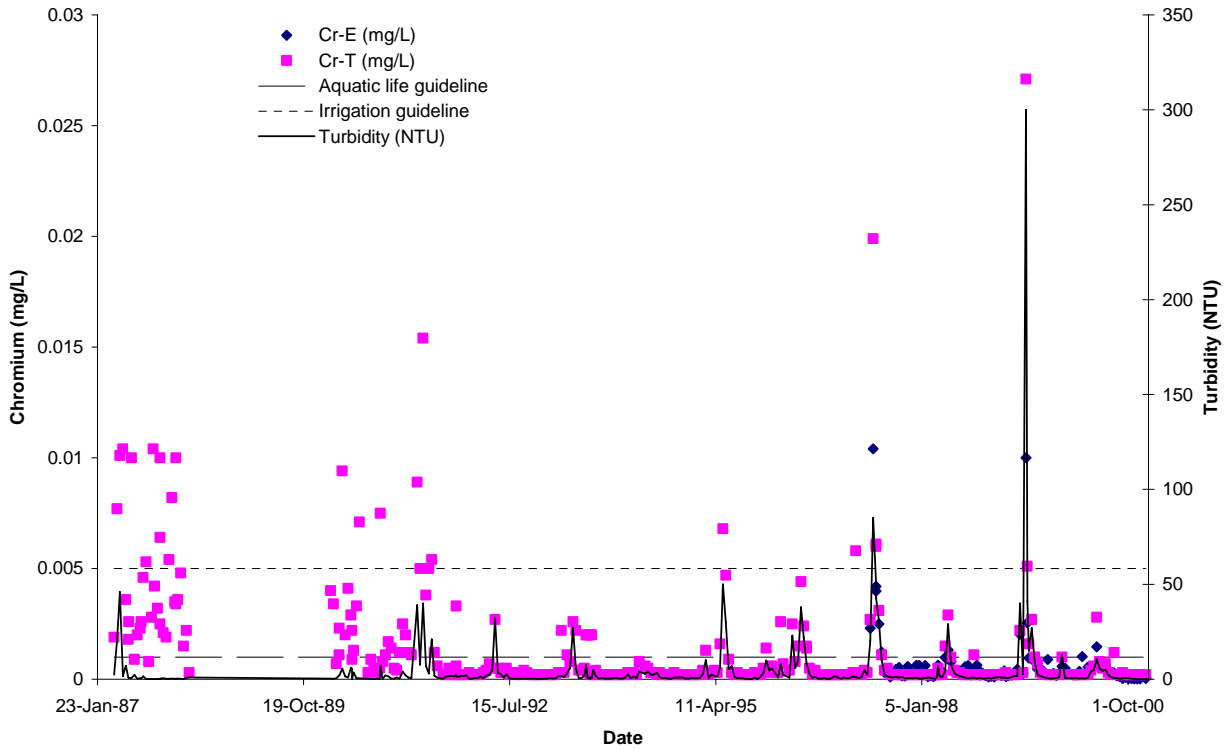


Figure 11. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Chromium



# Water Quality Assessment of the Similkameen River at U.S. Border (1976-2000)

Figure 12. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Cobalt

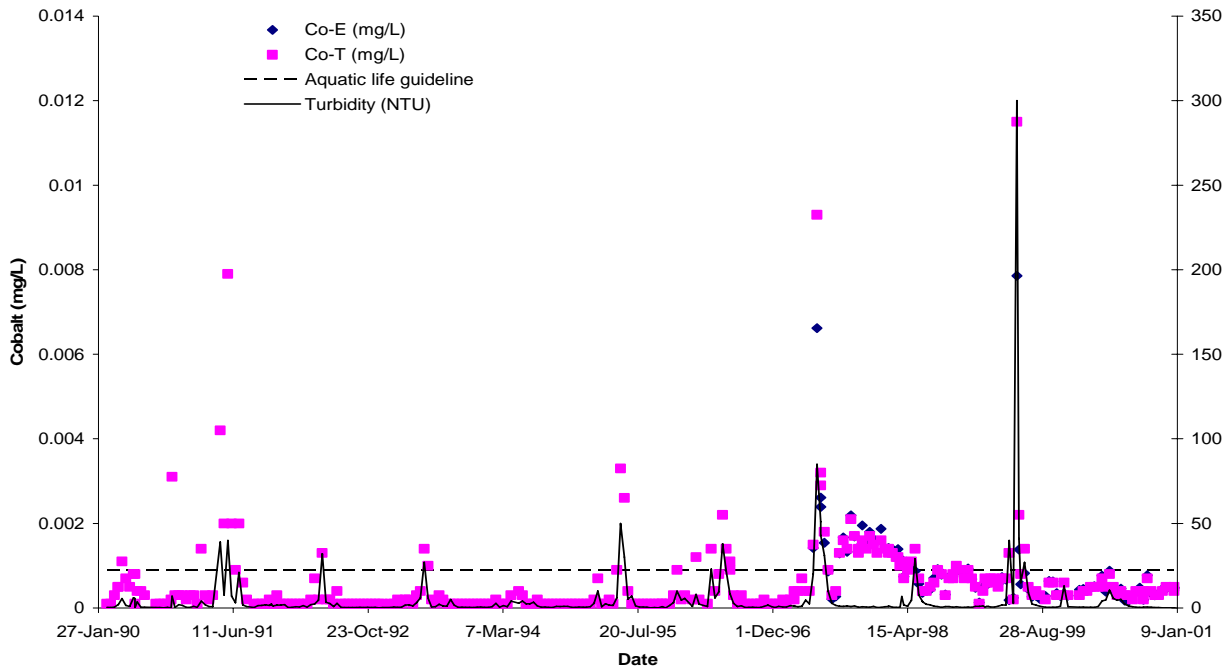


Figure 13. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Coliforms, Fecal

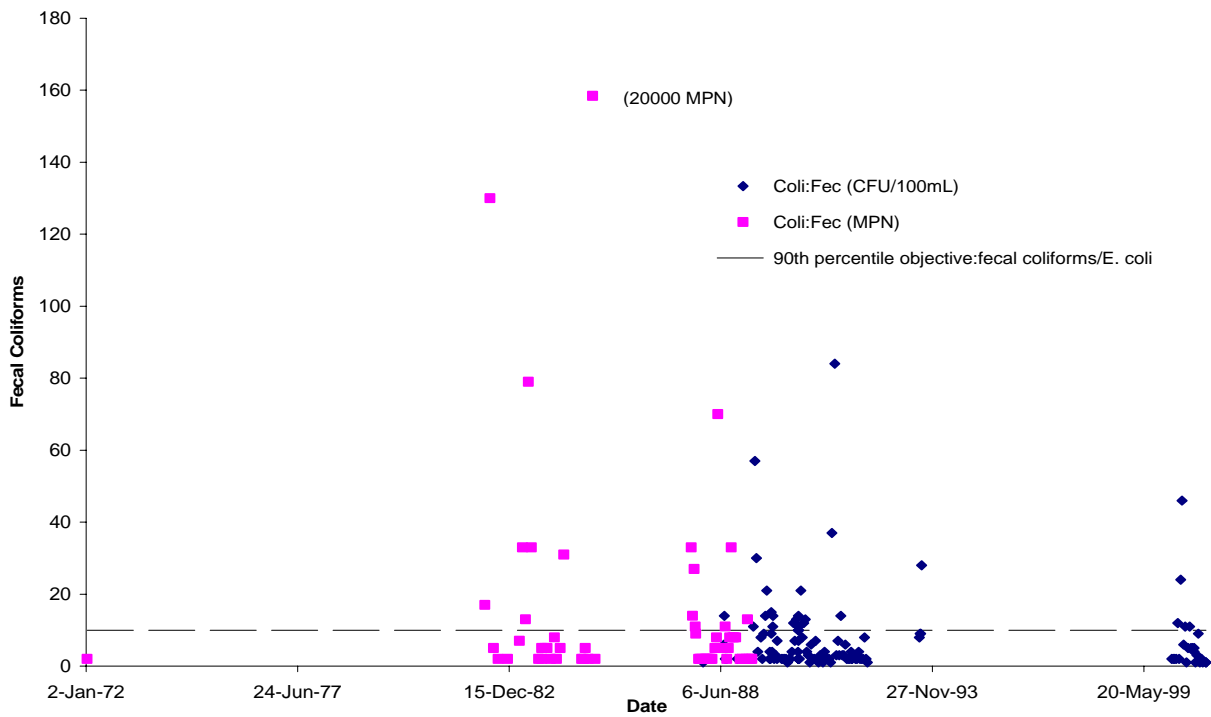


Figure 14. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Colour, True

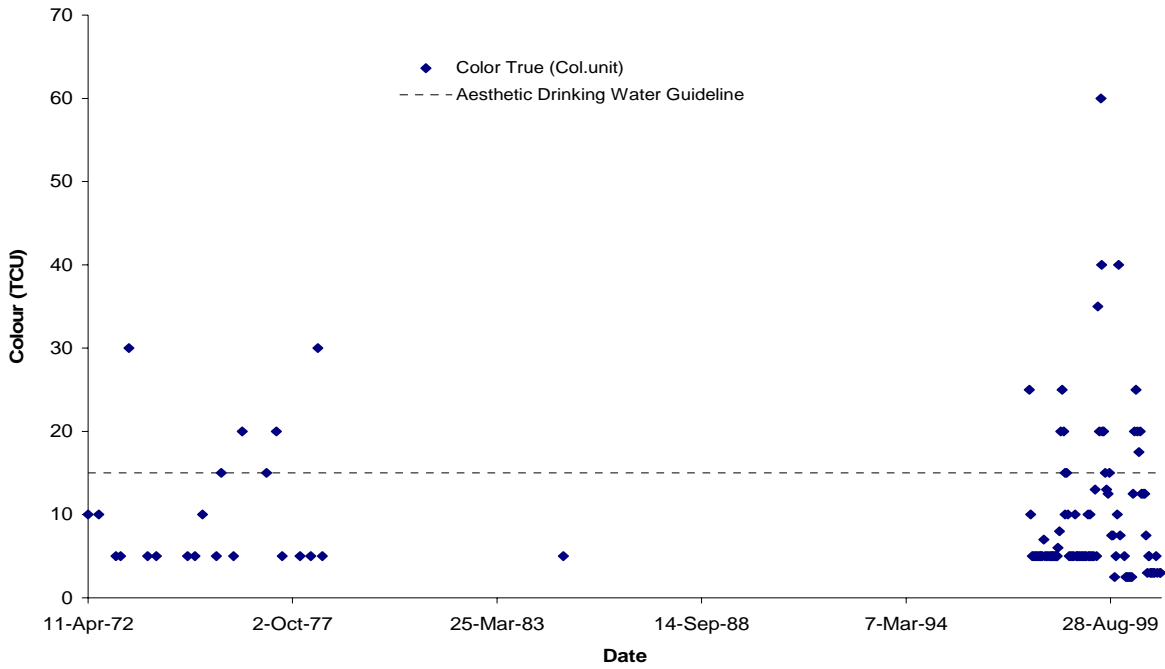


Figure 15. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Conductivity, Specific

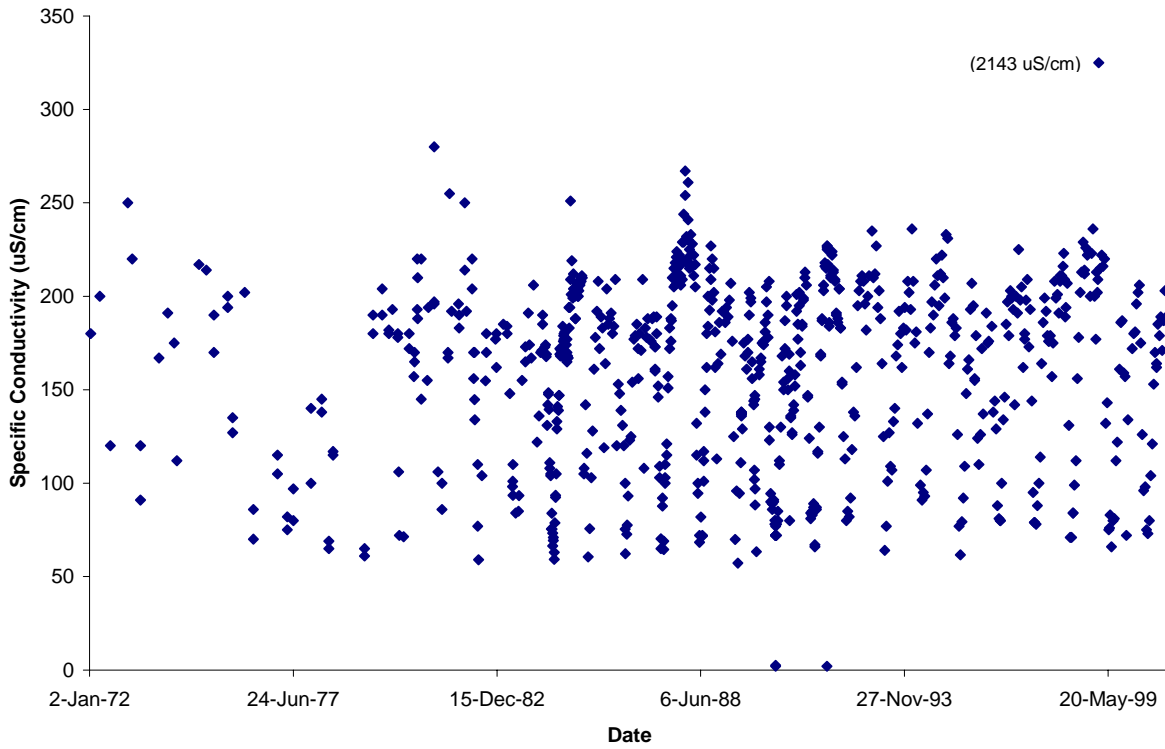


Figure 16. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Copper

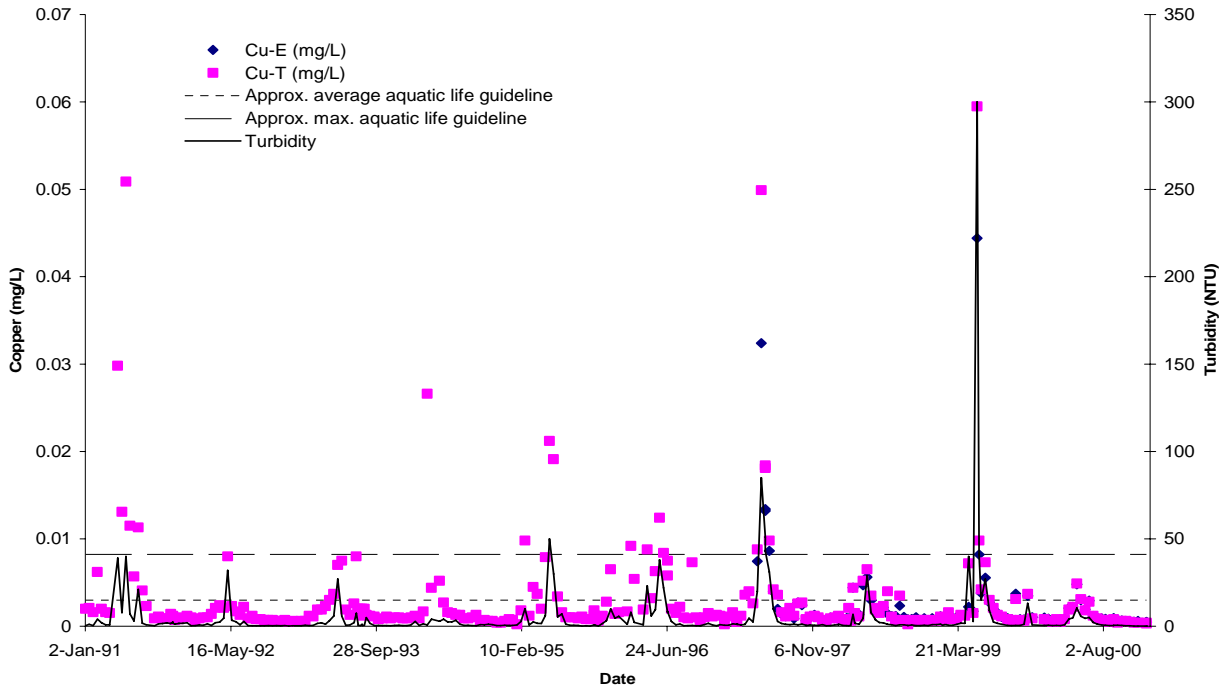


Figure 17. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Cyanide (SAD)

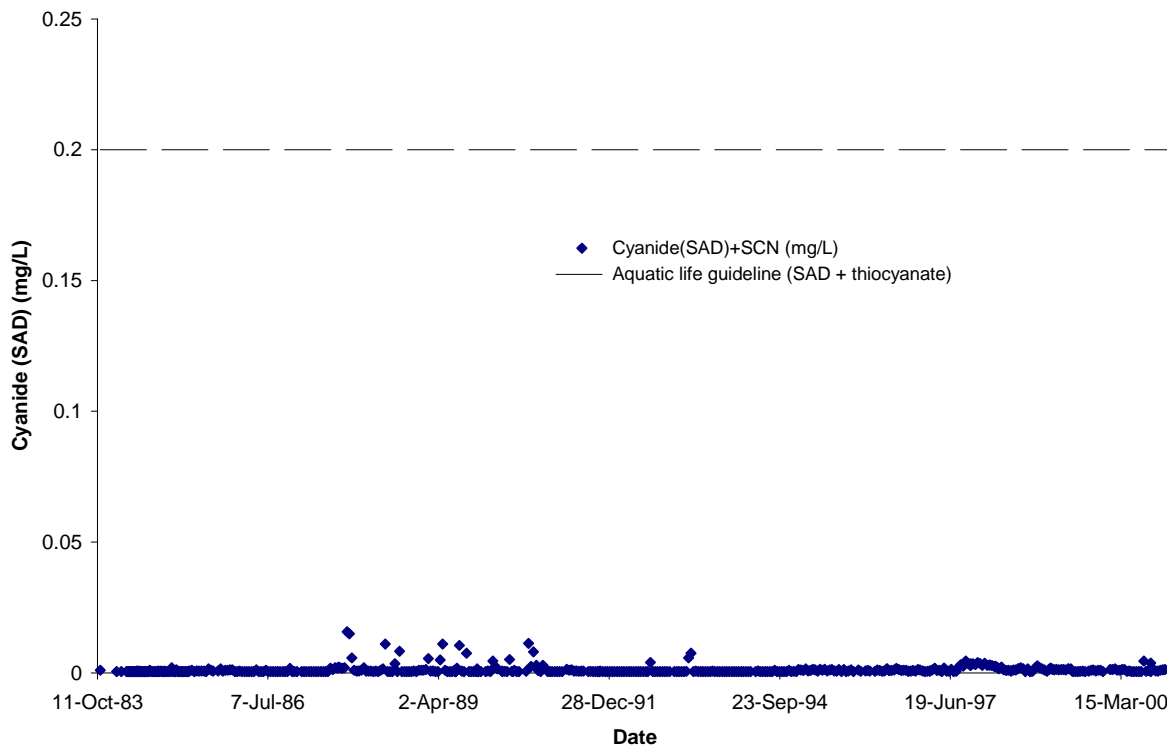




Figure 18. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Cyanide (WAD)

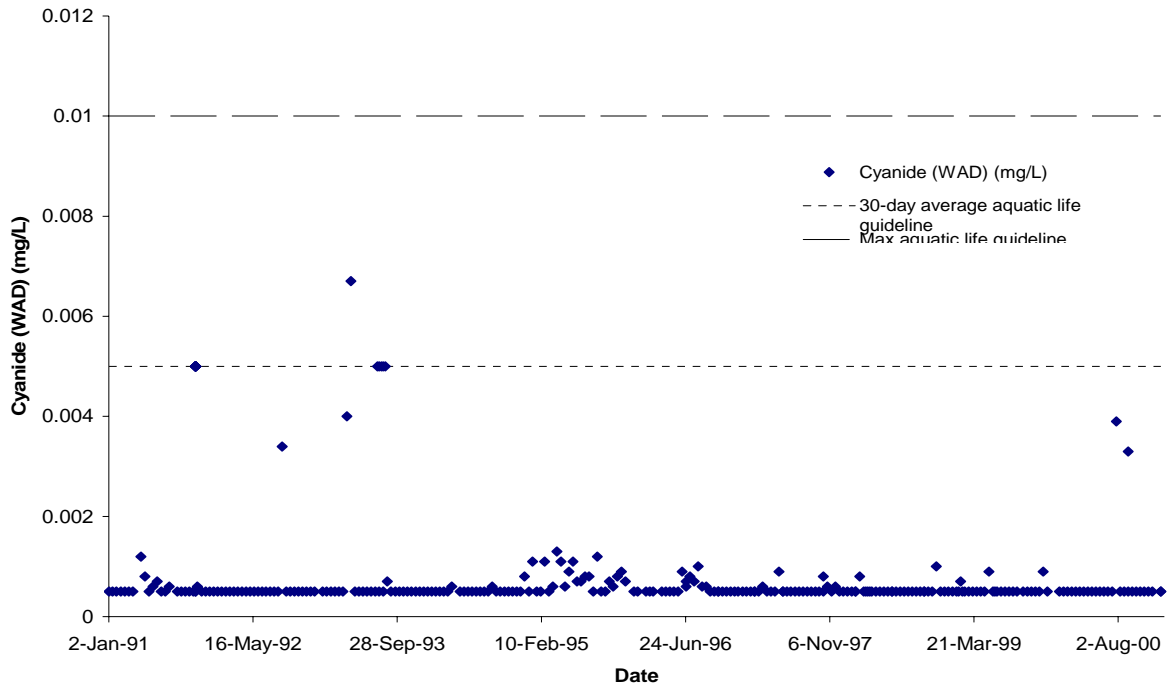


Figure 19. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Fluoride

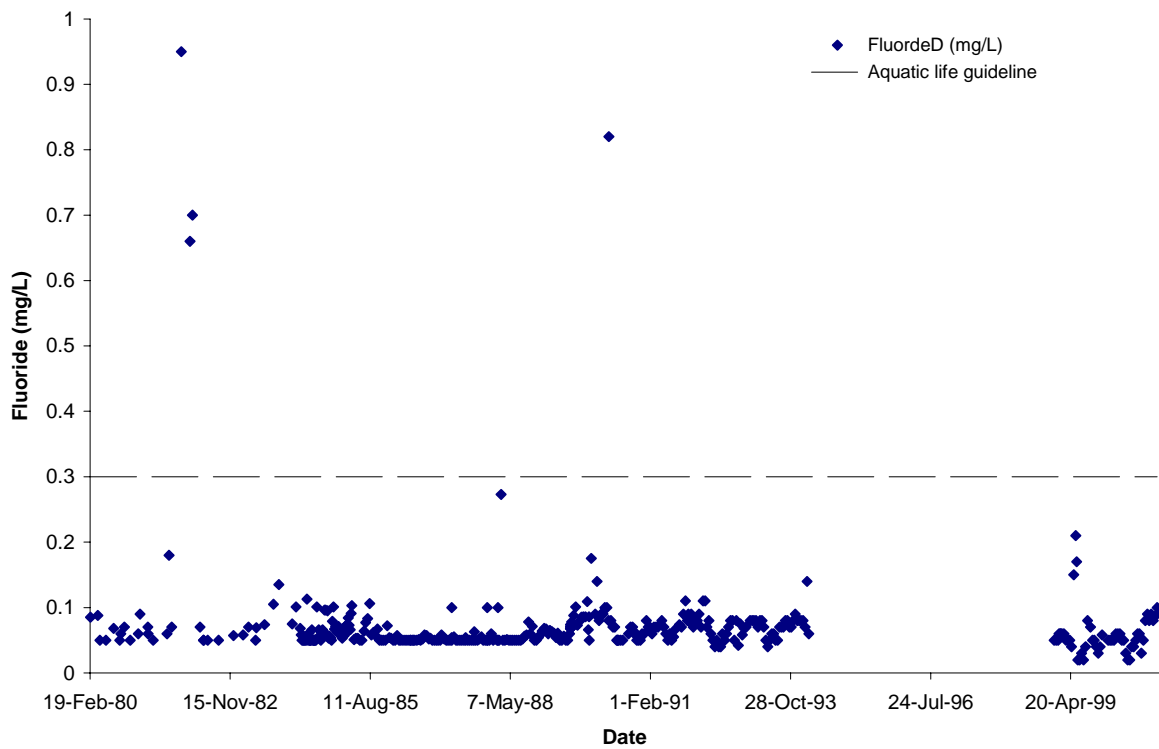


Figure 20. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Hardness

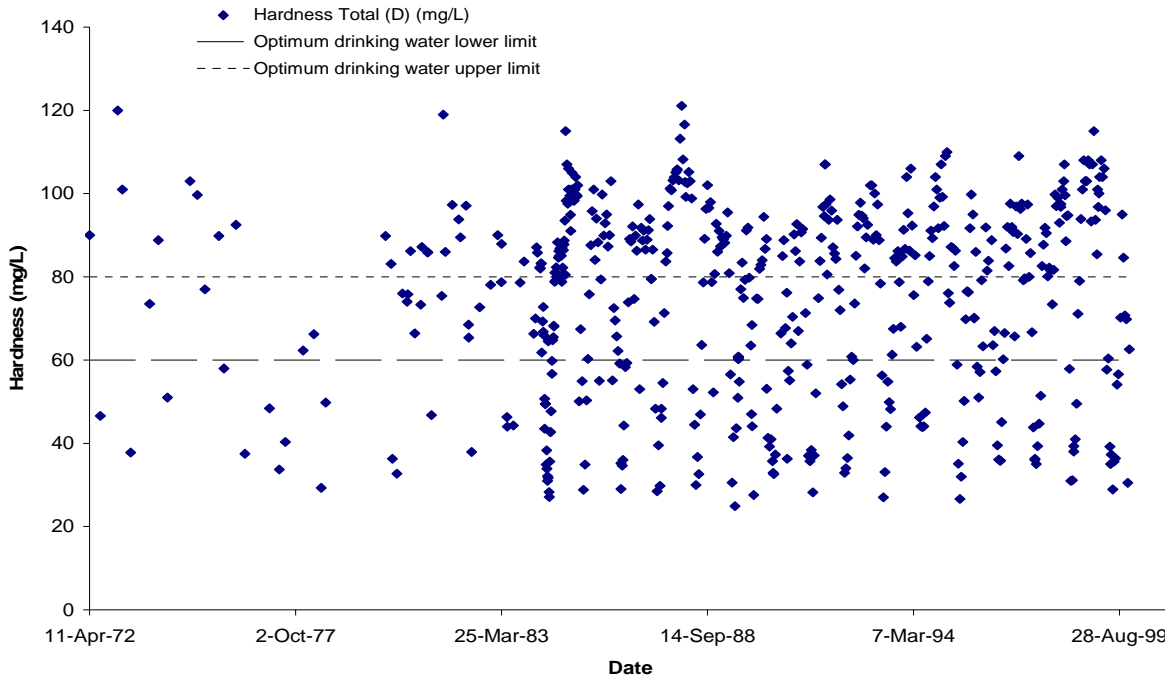
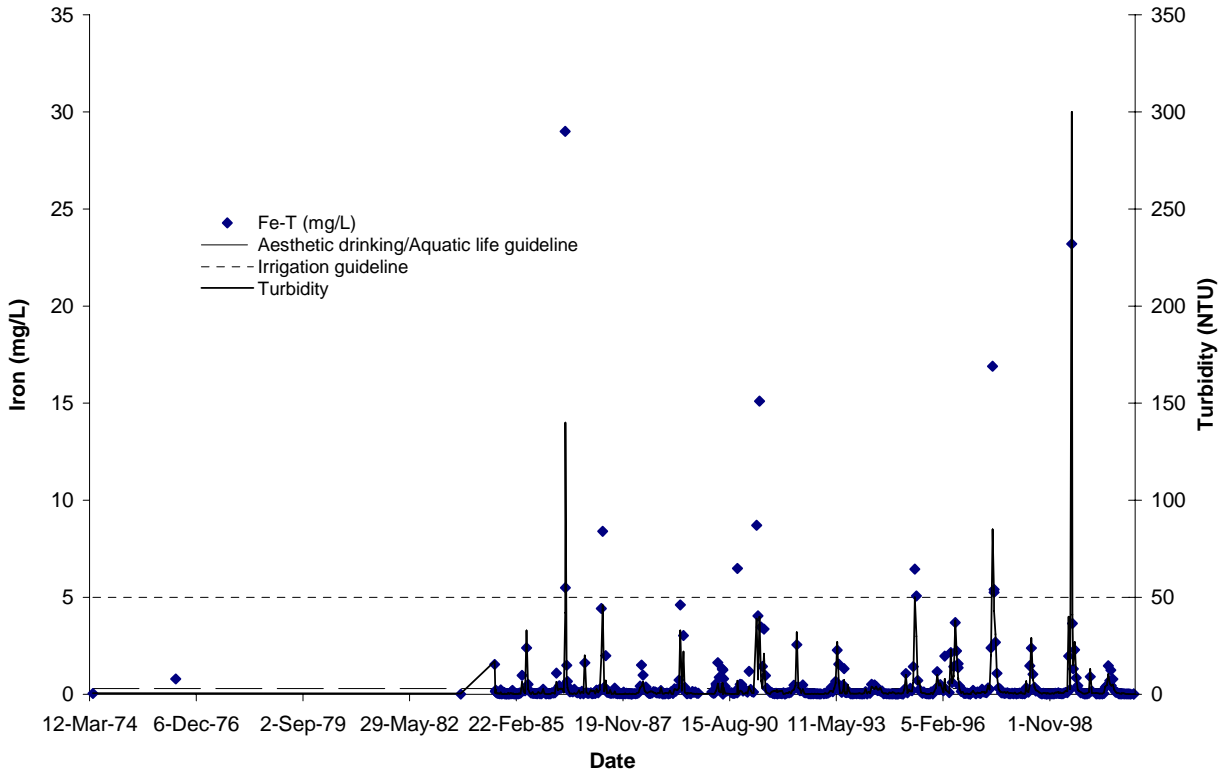


Figure 21. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Iron



# Water Quality Assessment of the Similkameen River at U.S. Border (1976-2000)

Figure 22. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Lead

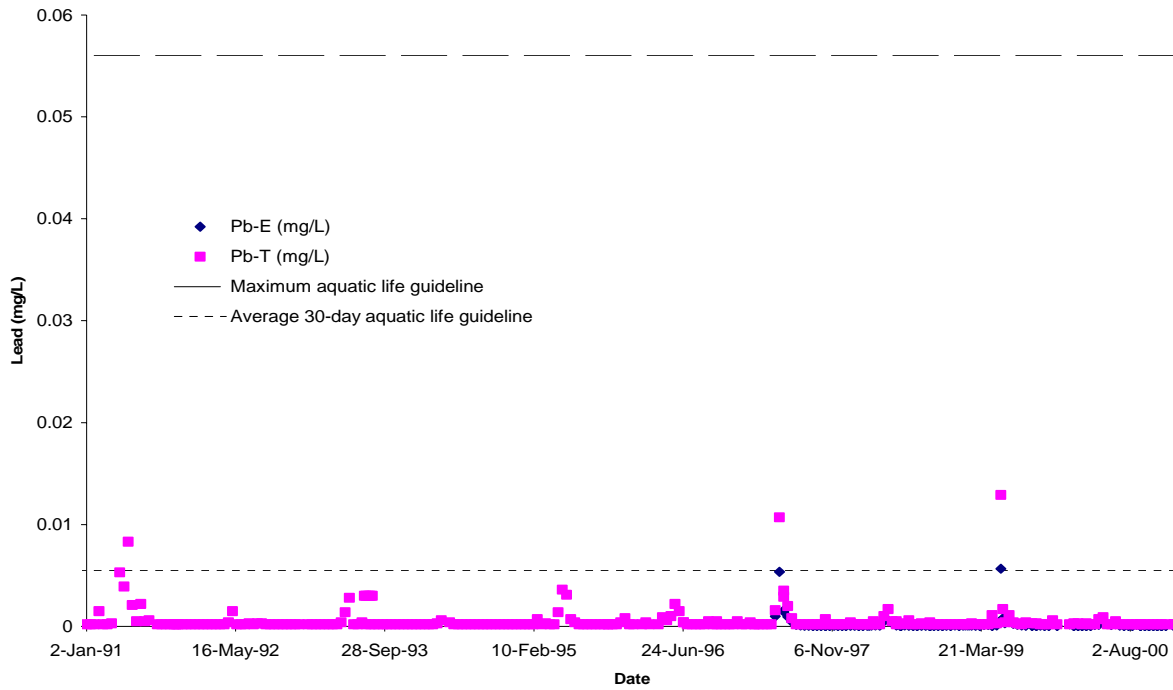


Figure 23. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Lithium

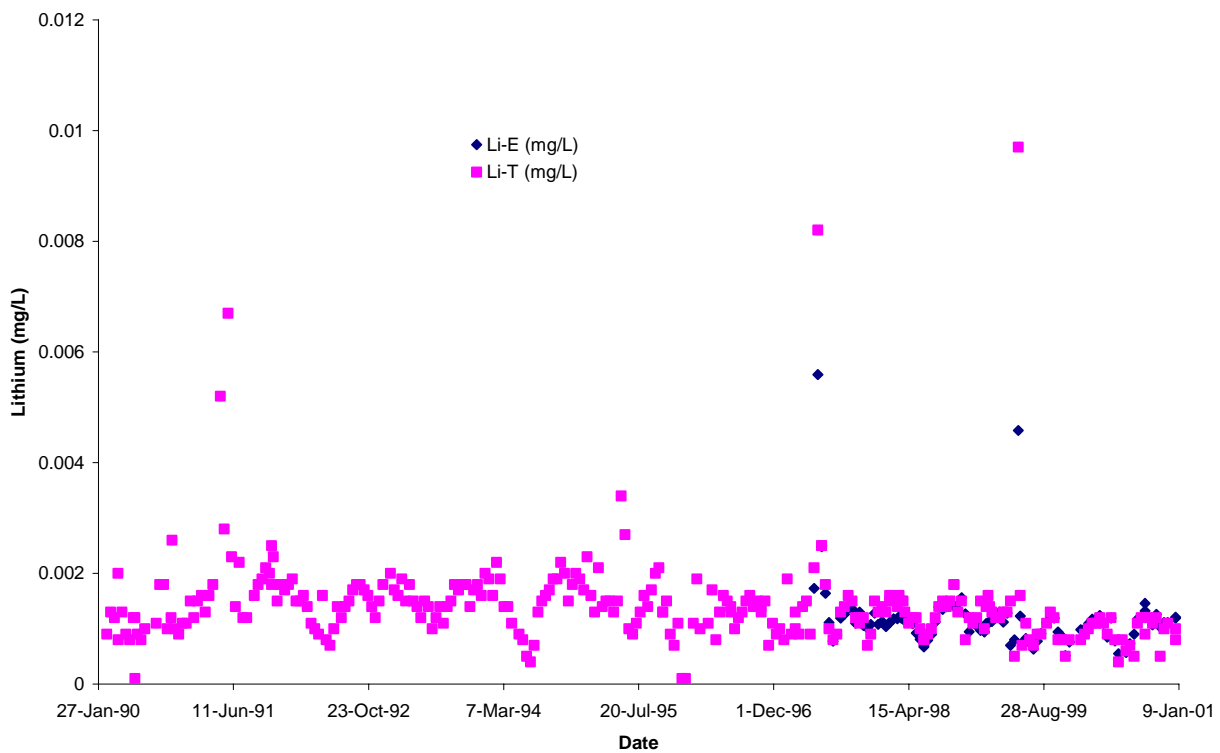


Figure 24. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Magnesium

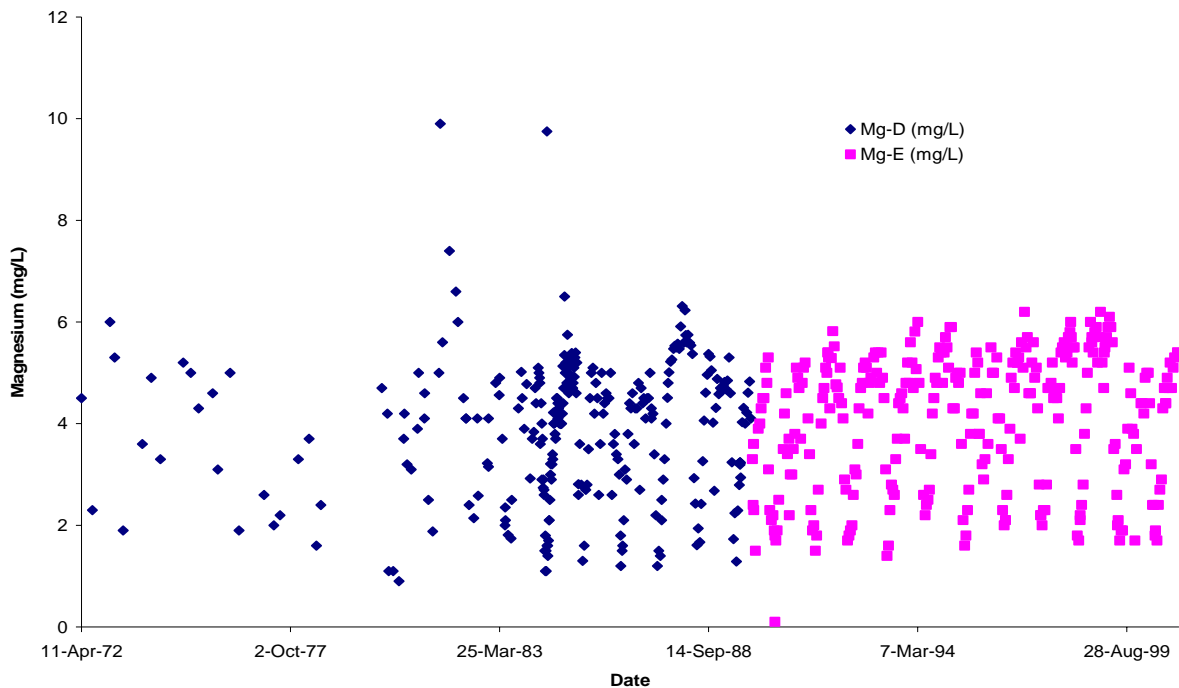


Figure 25. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Manganese

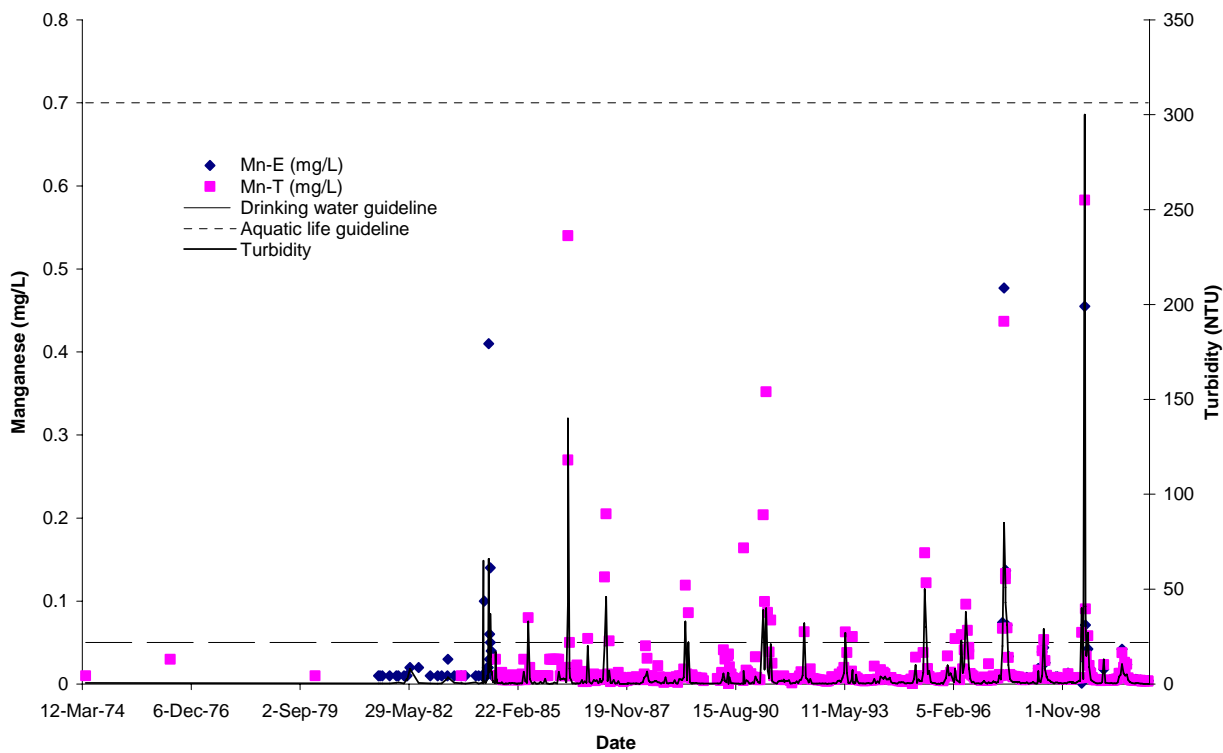


Figure 26. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Molybdenum

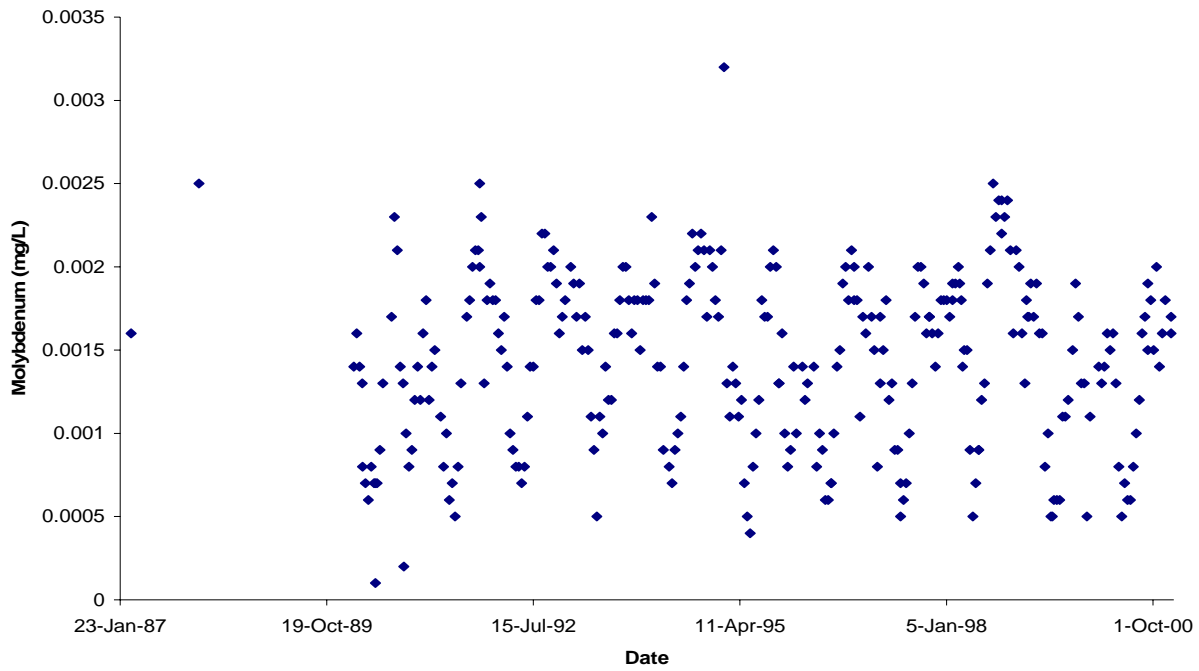


Figure 27. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Nickel

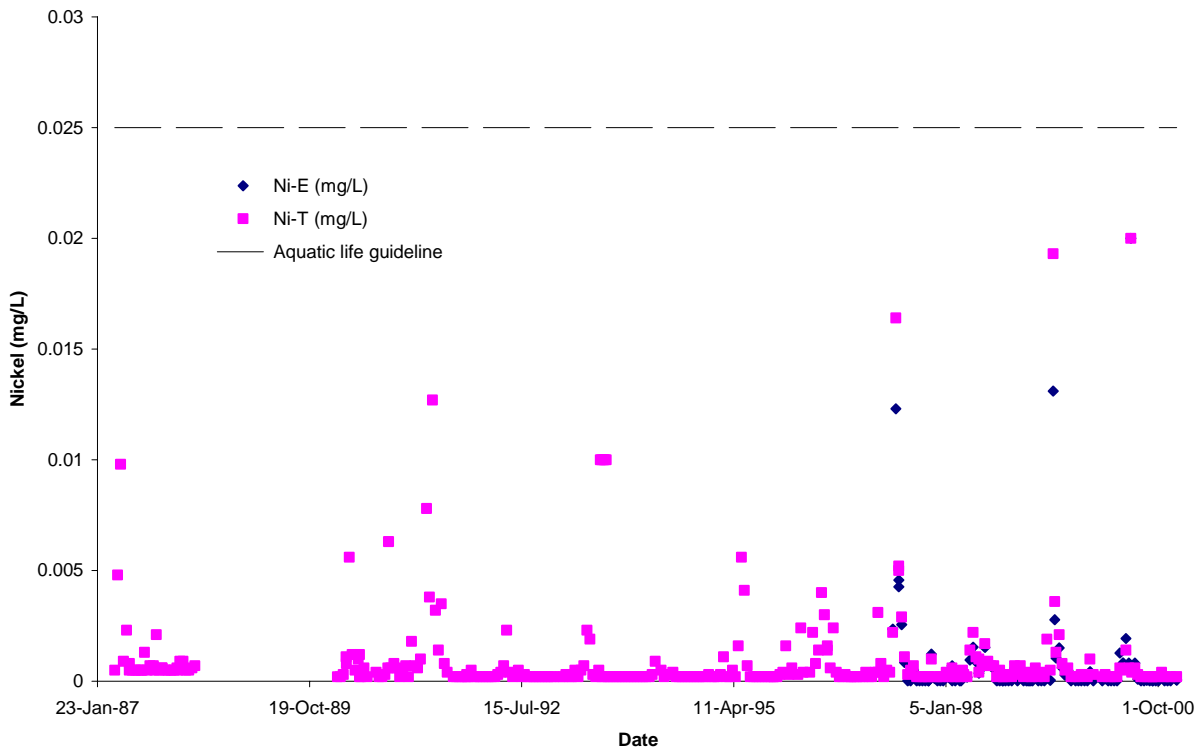


Figure 28. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Nitrogen, Total Dissolved

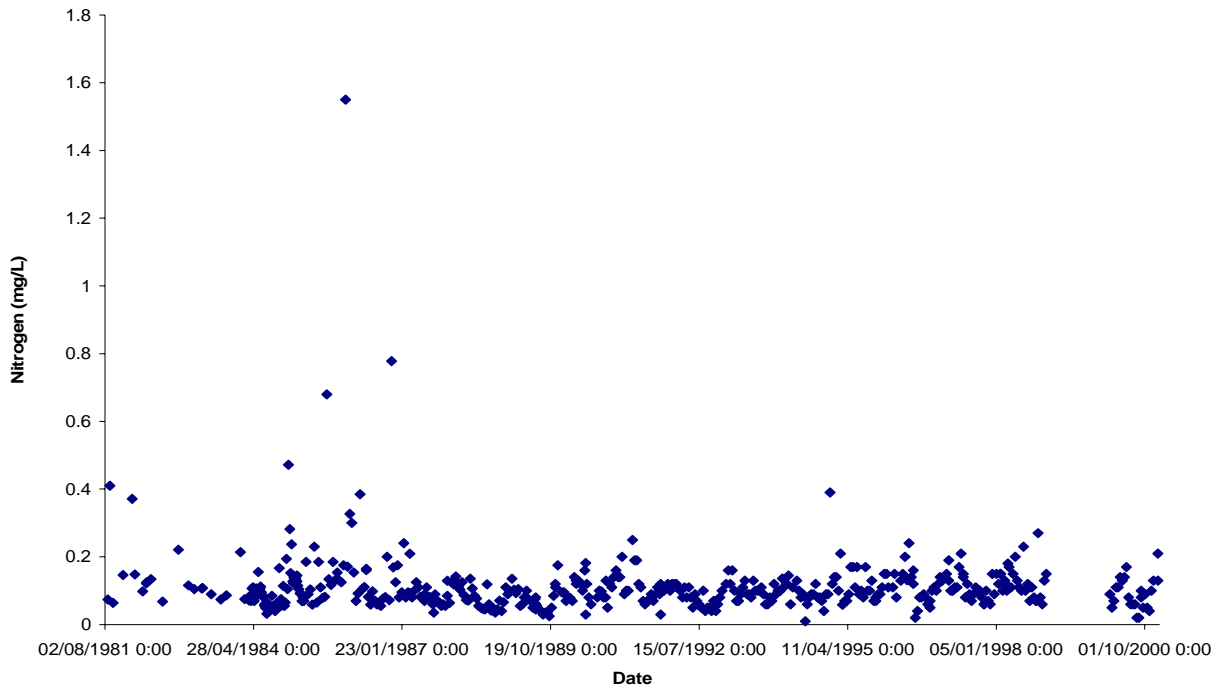


Figure 29. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - pH

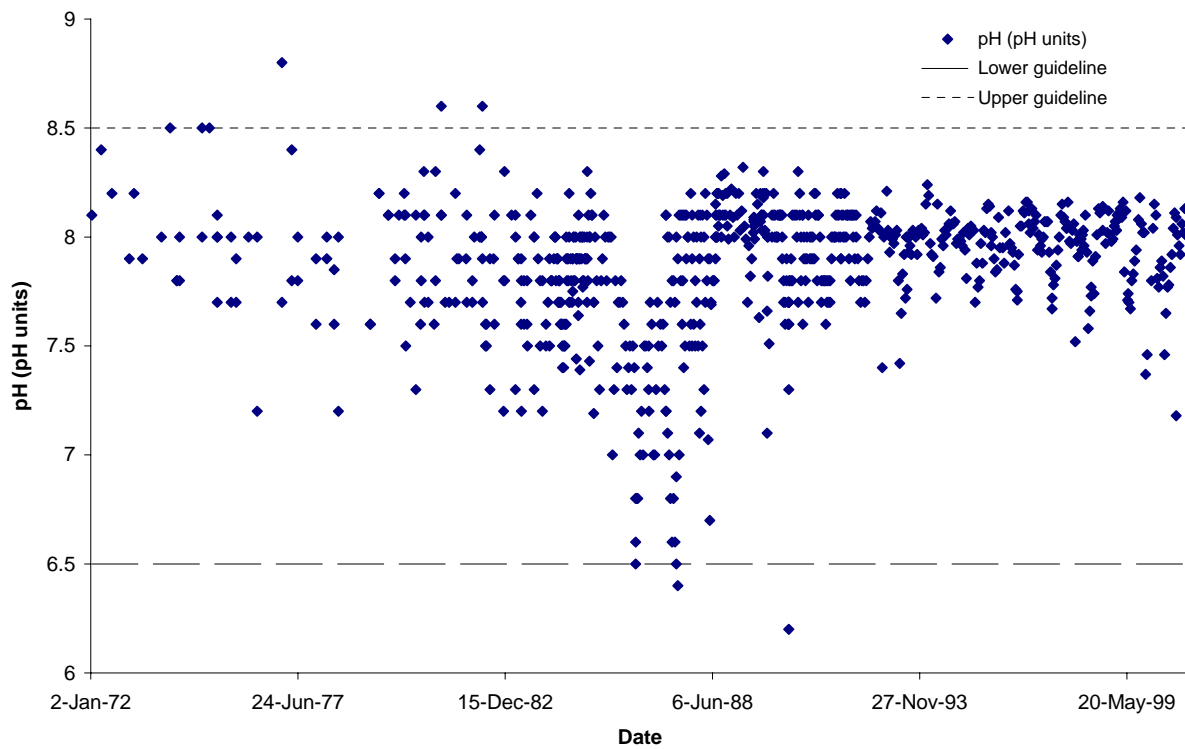


Figure 30. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Phosphorus, Dissolved

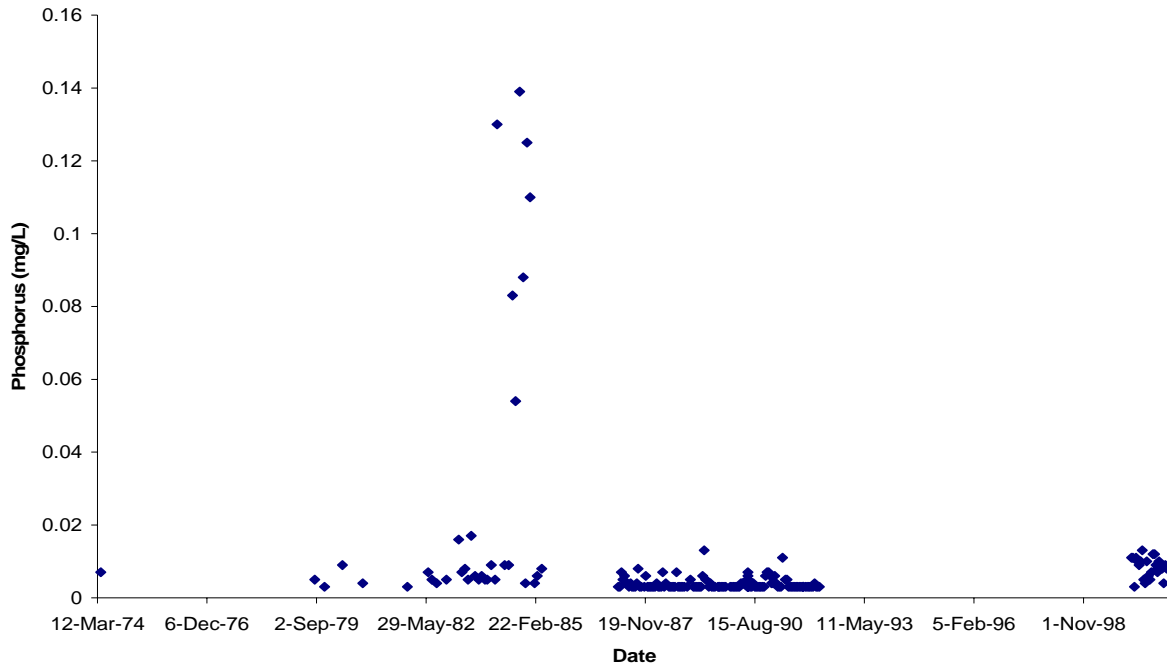
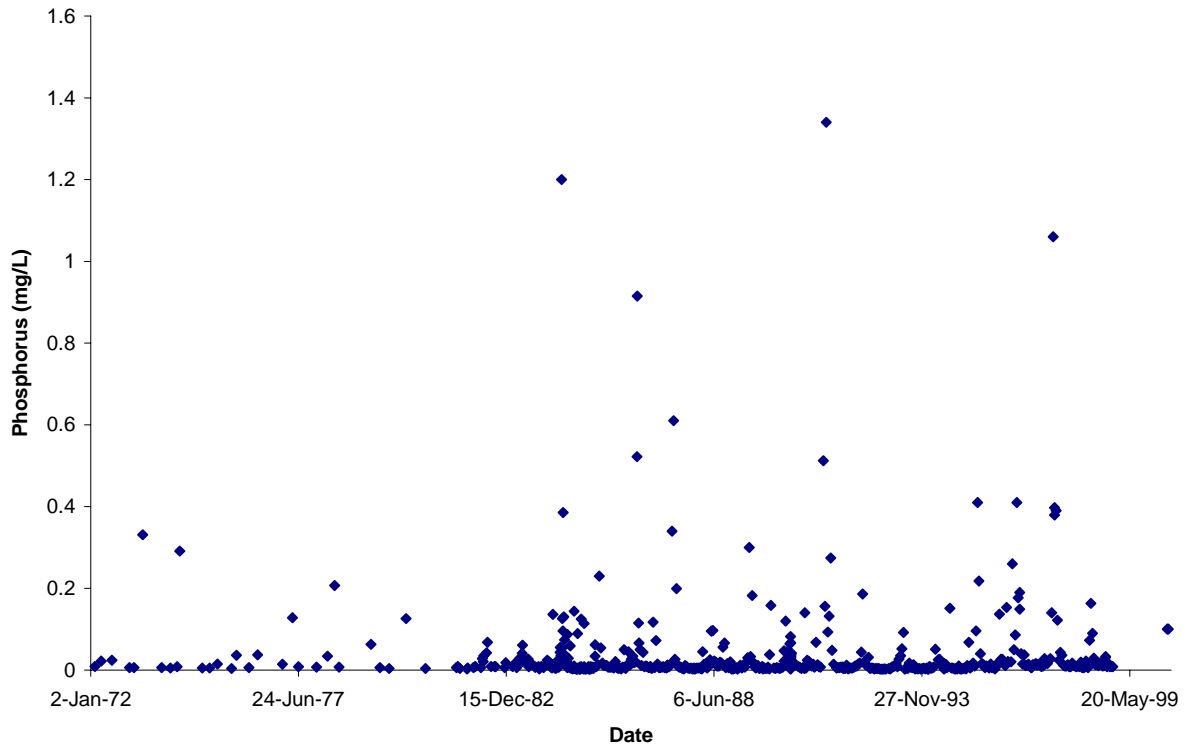


Figure 31. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Phosphorus, Total



# Water Quality Assessment of the Similkameen River at U.S. Border (1976-2000)

Figure 32. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Selenium

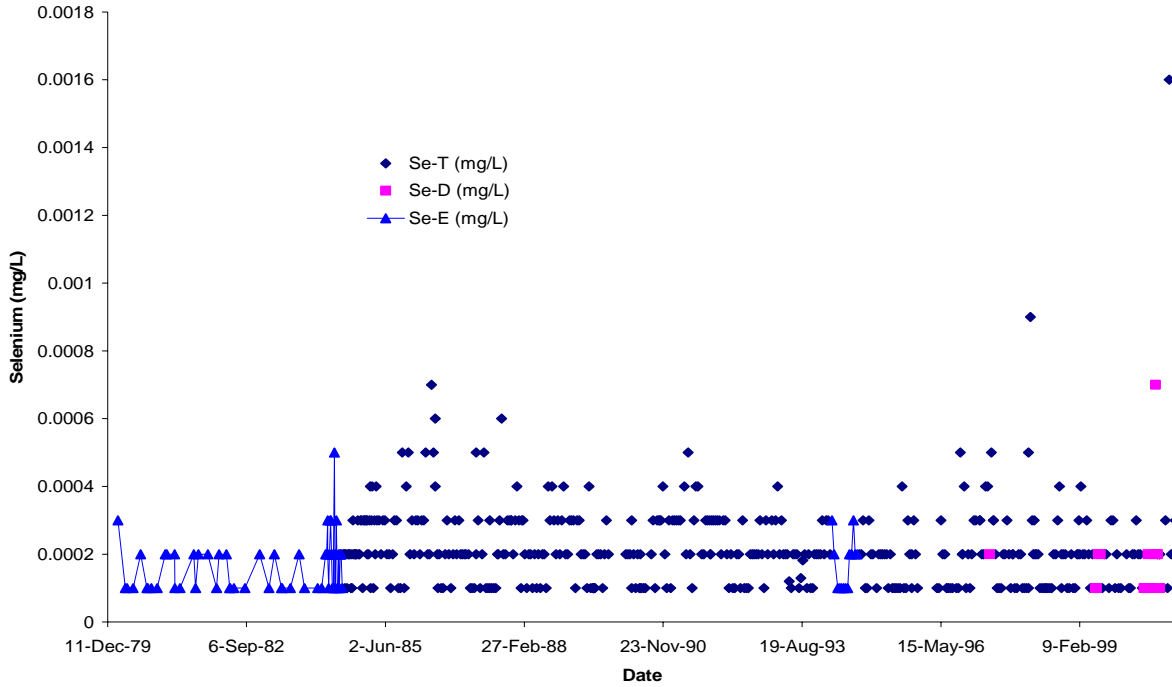
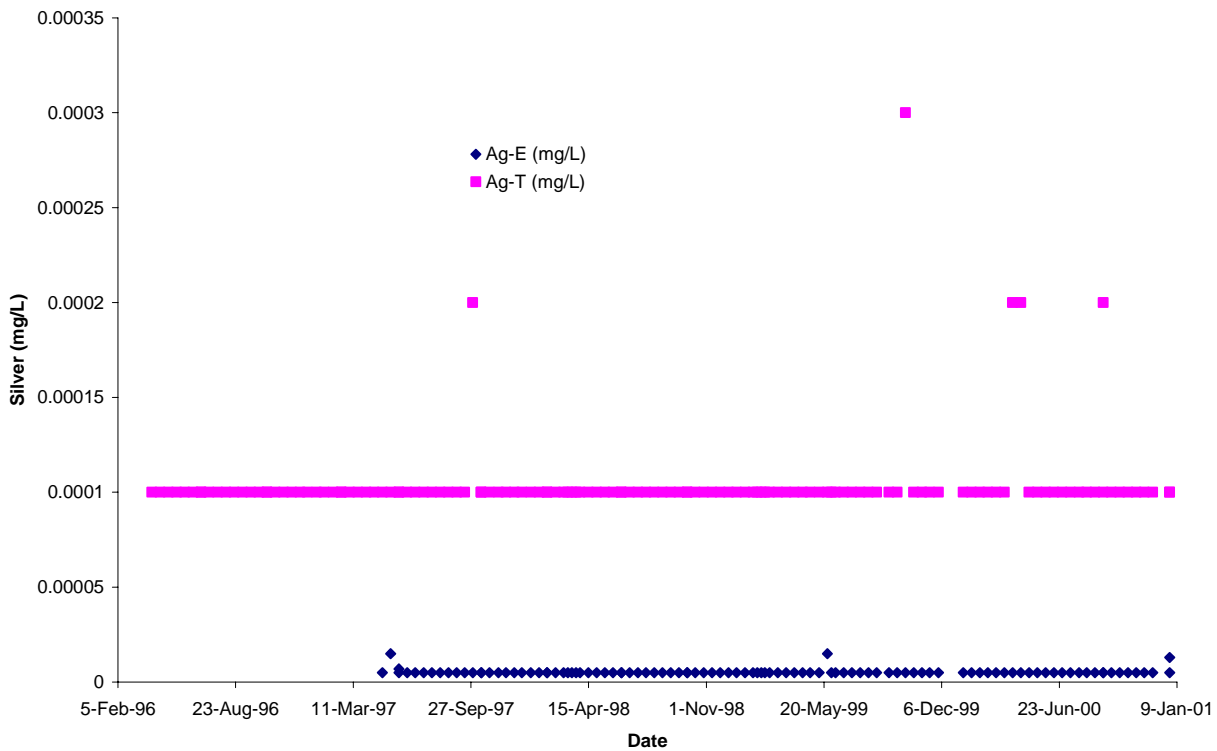


Figure 33. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Silver





# Water Quality Assessment of the Similkameen River at U.S. Border (1976-2000)

Figure 34. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Temperature

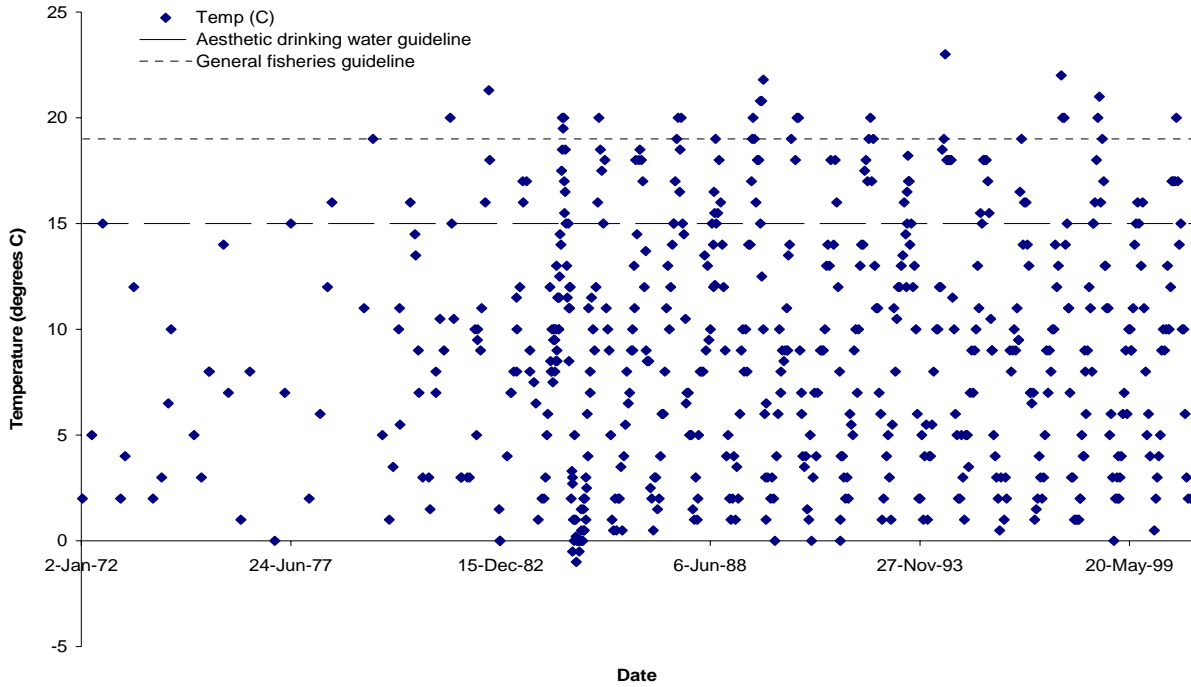
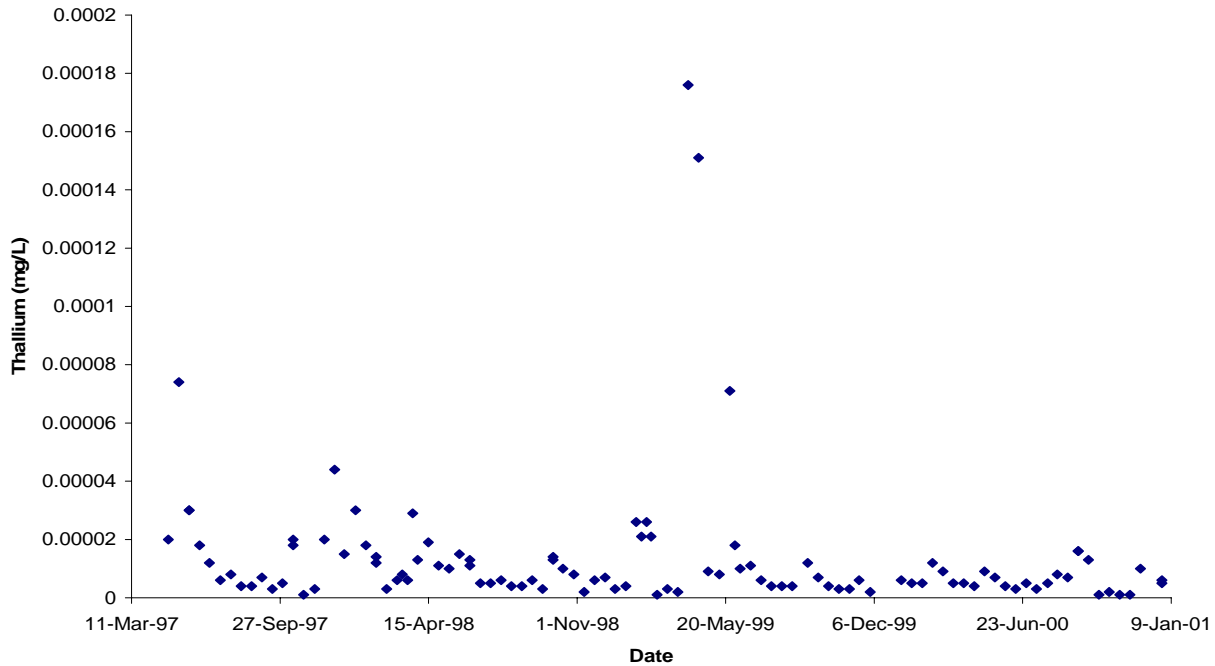


Figure 35. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Thallium



# Water Quality Assessment of the Similkameen River at U.S. Border (1976-2000)

Figure 36. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Turbidity

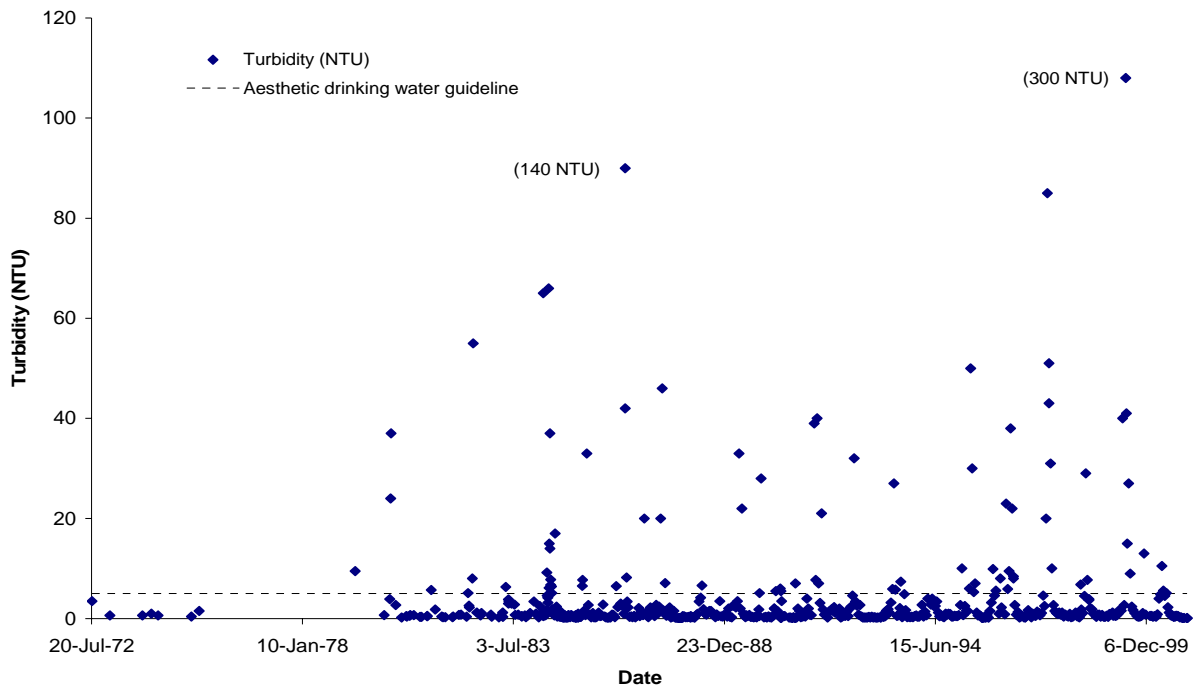


Figure 37. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Uranium

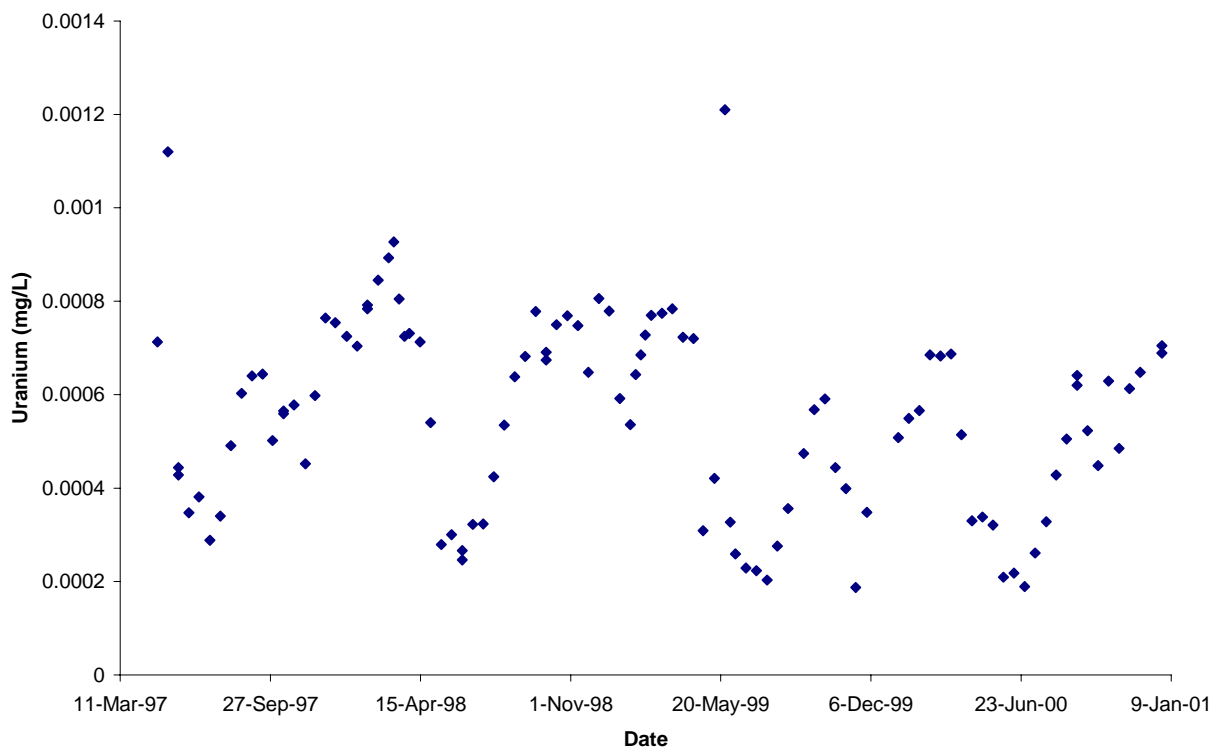


Figure 38. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Vanadium

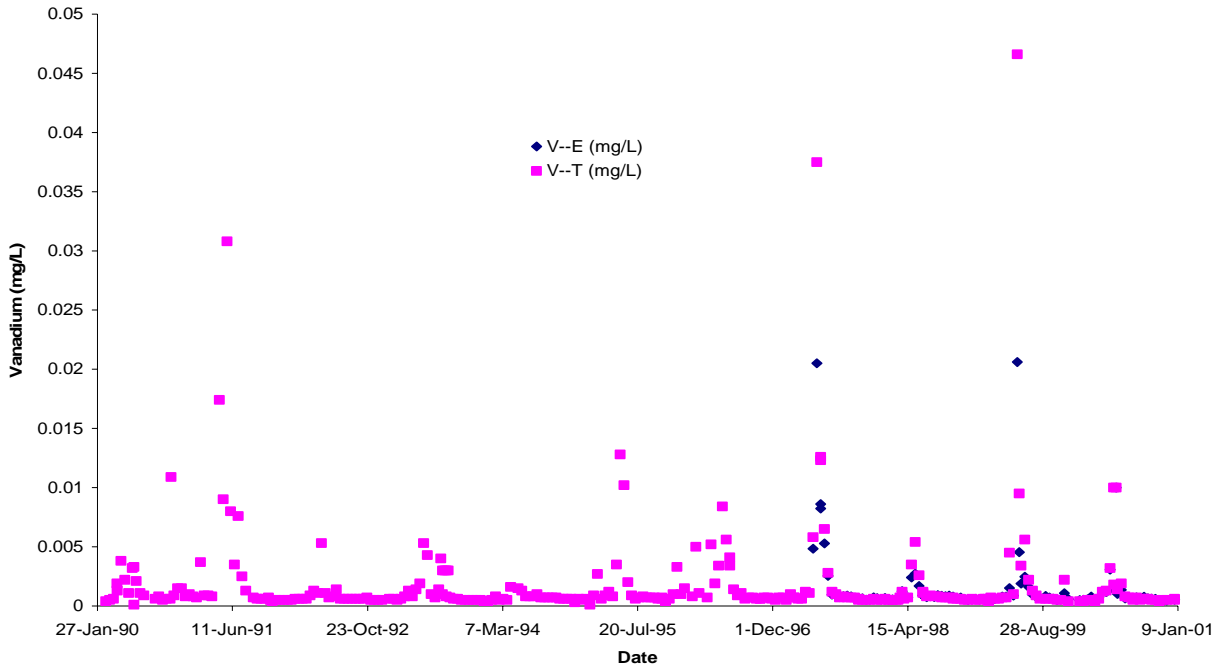


Figure 39. Similkameen River U/S U.S. Border - Zinc

