Ammonia

Ammonia is a good indicator of sewage, since its concentration is much higher there than in groundwater or tap water. High ammonia concentrations may also indicate liquid wastes from some industrial sites. Ammonia is relatively simple and safe to analyze. Some challenges include the tendency for ammonia to volatilize (i.e., turn into a gas and become non-conservative) and its potential generation from non-human sources, such as pets or wildlife.

Boron

Boron is an element present in the compound borax, which is often found in detergent and soap formulations. Consequently, boron is a good potential indicator for both laundry wash water and sewage. Preliminary research from Alabama supports this contention, particularly when it is combined with other detergent indicators, such as surfactants (Pitt, IDDE Project Support Material). Boron may not be a useful indicator everywhere in the country since it may be found at elevated levels in groundwater in some regions and is a common ingredient in water softeners products. Program mangers should collect data on boron concentrations in local tap water and groundwater sources to confirm whether it will be an effective indicator of illicit discharges.

Chlorine

Chlorine is used throughout the country to disinfect tap water, except where private wells provide the water supply. Chlorine concentrations in tap water tend to be significantly higher than most other discharge types. Unfortunately, chlorine is extremely volatile, and even moderate levels of organic materials can cause chlorine levels to drop below detection levels. Because chlorine is non-conservative, it is not a reliable indicator, although if very high chlorine levels are measured, it is a strong indication of a water line break, swimming pool discharge, or industrial discharge from a chlorine bleaching process.

Color

Color is a numeric computation of the color observed in a water quality sample, as measured in cobalt-platinum units (APHA, 1998). Both industrial liquid wastes and sewage tend to have elevated color values. Unfortunately, some "clean" flow types can also have high color values. Field testing by Pitt (IDDE Project Support Material) found high color values associated for all contaminated flows, but also many uncontaminated flows, which yielded numerous false positives. Overall, color may be a good first screen for problem outfalls, but needs to be supplemented by other indicator parameters.

Conductivity

Conductivity, or specific conductance, is a measure of how easily electricity can flow through a water sample. Conductivity is often strongly correlated with the total amount of dissolved material in water, known as Total Dissolved Solids. The utility of conductivity as an indicator depends on whether concentrations are elevated in "natural" or clean waters. In particular, conductivity is a poor indicator of illicit discharge in estuarine waters or in northern regions where deicing salts are used (both have high conductivity readings).

Field testing in Alabama suggests that conductivity has limited value to detect sewage or wash water (Pitt, IDDE Project Support Material). Conductivity has some

value in detecting industrial discharges that can exhibit extremely high conductivity readings. Conductivity is extremely easy to measure with field probes, so it has the potential to be a useful supplemental indicator in subwatersheds that are dominated by industrial land uses.

Detergents

Most illicit discharges have elevated concentration of detergents. Sewage and washwater discharges contain detergents used to clean clothes or dishes, whereas liquid wastes contain detergents from industrial or commercial cleansers. The nearly universal presence of detergents in illicit discharges, combined with their absence in natural waters or tap water, makes them an excellent indicator. Research has revealed three indicator parameters that measure the level of detergent or its components-- surfactants, fluorescence, and surface tension (Pitt, IDDE Project Support Material). Surfactants have been the most widely applied and transferable of the three indicators. Fluorescence and surface tension show promise, but only limited field testing has been performed on these more experimental parameters. Methods and laboratory protocols for each of the three detergent indicator parameters are reviewed in Appendix F2.

E. coli, Enterococci and Total Coliform

Each of these bacteria is found at very high concentrations in sewage compared to other flow types, and is a good indicator of sewage or septage discharges, unless pet or wildlife sources exist in the subwatershed. Overall, bacteria are good supplemental indicators and can be used to find "problem" streams or outfalls that exceed public health standards. Relatively simple analytical methods are now available to test for bacteria indicators, although they still suffer from two monitoring constraints. The first is the relatively long analysis time (18-24 hours) to get results, and the second is that the waste produced by the tests may be classified as a biohazard and require special disposal techniques.

Fluorescence

Laundry detergents are highly fluorescent because optical brighteners are added to the formula to produce "brighter whites." Optical brighteners are the reason that white clothes appear to have a bluish color when placed under a fluorescent light. Fluorescence is a very sensitive indicator of the presence of detergents in discharges, using a fluorometer to measure fluorescence at specific wavelengths of light. Since no chemicals are needed for testing, fluorometers have minimal safety and waste disposal concerns.

Some technical concerns do limit the utility of fluorescence as an indicator of illicit discharges. The concerns include the presence of fluorescence in non-illicit flow types such as irrigation water, the considerable variation of fluorescence between different detergent brands, and the lack of a readily standard or benchmark concentration for optical brighteners. For example, Pitt (IDDE Project Support Material) measured fluorescence in mg/L of Tide™ brand detergent, and found the degree of fluorescence varied regionally, temporally, and between specific detergent formulations.

Given these current limitations, fluorescence is best combined with other detergent indicators such as surfactants. Appendix F3 should be consulted for more detailed information on analytical methods and experimental field testing using fluorescence as an indicator parameter.

Fluoride

Fluoride is added to drinking water supplies in most communities to improve dental health, and normally found at a concentration of two parts per million in tapwater. Consequently, fluoride is an excellent conservative indicator of tap water discharges or leaks from water supply pipes that end up in the storm drain. Fluoride is obviously not a good indicator in communities that do not fluoridate drinking water, or where individual wells provide drinking water. One key constraint is that the reagent used in the recommended analytical method for fluoride is considered a hazardous waste, and must be disposed of properly.

Hardness

Hardness measures the positive ions dissolved in water and primarily include magnesium and calcium in natural waters, but are sometimes influenced by other metals. Field testing by Pitt (IDDE Project Support Material) suggests that hardness has limited value as an indicator parameter, except when values are extremely high or low (which may signal the presence of some liquid wastes). Hardness may be applicable in communities where hardness levels are elevated in groundwater due to karst or limestone terrain. In these regions, hardness can help distinguish natural groundwater flows present in outfalls from tap water and other flow types.

pH

Most discharge flow types are neutral, having a pH value around 7, although groundwater concentrations can be somewhat variable. pH is a reasonably good indicator for liquid wastes from industries, which can have very high or low pH (ranging from 3 to 12). The pH of residential wash water tends to be rather basic (pH of 8 or 9). The pH of a discharge is very simple to monitor in the field with low cost test strips or probes. Although pH data is often not conclusive by itself, it can identify problem outfalls that merit follow-up investigations using more effective indicators.

Potassium

Potassium is found at relatively high concentrations in sewage, and extremely high concentrations in many industrial process waters. Consequently, potassium can act as a good first screen for industrial wastes, and can also be used in combination with ammonia to distinguish wash waters from sanitary wastes. (See Chapter 12). Simple field probes can detect potassium at relatively high concentrations (5 mg/L), whereas more complex colorimetric tests are needed to detect potassium concentrations lower than 5 mg/L.

Surface Tension

Surfactants remove dirt particles by reducing the surface tension of the bubbles formed in laundry water when it is agitated. Reduced surface tension makes dirt particles less likely to settle on a solid surface (e.g., clothes or dishes) and become suspended instead on the water's surface. The visible manifestation of reduced surface tension is the formation of foam or bubbles on the water surface. Pitt (IDDE Project Support Material) tested a very simple procedure to measure surface tension that quantifies the formation of foam and bubbles in sample bottles. Initial laboratory tests suggest that surface tension is a good indicator of surfactants, but only when they are present at relatively high concentrations. Section F3 provides a more detailed description of the surface tension measurement procedure.

Surfactants

Surfactants are the active ingredient in most commercial detergents, and are typically measured as Methyl Blue Active Substances (or MBAS). They are a synthetic replacement for soap, which builds up deposits on clothing over time. Since surfactants are not found in nature, but are always present in detergents, they are excellent indicators of sewage and wash waters. The presence of surfactants in cleansers, emulsifiers and lubricants also makes them an excellent indicator of industrial or commercial liquid wastes. In fact, research by Pitt (IDDE Project Support Material) found that detergents were an excellent indicator of "contaminated" discharges in Alabama (i.e., discharges that were not tap water or groundwater). Several analytical methods are available to monitor surfactants. Unfortunately, the reagents used involve toluene, chloroform, or benzene, each of which is considered hazardous waste with a potential human health risk. The most common analysis method uses chloroform as a reagent, and is recommended because it is relatively safer when compared to other reagents.

Turbidity

Turbidity is a quantitative measure of cloudiness in water, and is normally measured with a simple field probe. While turbidity itself cannot always distinguish between contaminated flow types, it is a potentially useful screening indicator to determine if the discharge is contaminated (i.e., not composed of tap water or groundwater).

Research Indicators

In recent years, researchers have explored a series of other indicators to identify illicit discharges, including fecal steroids (such as coprostanol), caffeine, specific fragrances associated with detergents and stable isotopes of oxygen. Each of these research indicators is profiled in Pitt (IDDE Project Support Material) and summarized below in Table F1. Most research indicators require sophisticated equipment and specific expertise that limit their utility as a general indicator, given the high sampling cost and long turn-around times needed. To date, field tests of research indicators have yielded mixed results, and they are currently thought to be more appropriate for special research projects than for routine outfall testing. While they are not discussed further in this manual, future research and testing may improve their utility as indicators of illicit discharges.