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Idaho retesting for mercury

By ADELLA HARDING - Staff Writer

ELKO - Idaho Department of Environmental Quality is resampling water at Salmon Falls Creek Reservoir after discovering earlier mercury samples were contaminated.

"We'll be going out tomorrow and Wednesday," Michael McIntyre, program manager for surface water for the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, said Monday.

The contaminated samples showed mercury levels roughly 180 percent higher than what is considered healthy in the waters of Salmon Falls Creek Reservoir.

McIntyre said the problem was in the testing equipment for water samples on the surface and at depth, but the data that showed high mercury levels in fish in the reservoir is correct, as is water data for several creeks, including Salmon Falls Creek.

"The fish advisory remains in place for the reservoir," McIntyre said.

The mercury showing up in the fish is what led the Idaho Conservation League to focus on Nevada gold mines as possible sources for the mercury.

Justin Hayes of the Idaho Conservation League said Monday afternoon he had heard "testing may not have been according to protocols," and Idaho DEQ was resampling.

Mines processing gold through their mills release mercury into the air, but the largest mining companies have had a voluntary program in place for several years to reduce mercury emissions into the air.

Newmont Mining Corp., Barrick Goldstrike Mines Inc., Placer Dome Inc. and Queenstake Resources made up the volunteer program. Barrick Gold Corp. and Placer Dome merged earlier this month.

Also, the Nevada Division of Environmental Protection is preparing regulations that make mercury controls mandatory. NDEP held meetings in Elko and Reno last month to gather comments on the proposed regulations.

McIntyre said the Idaho DEQ is keeping NDEP informed, as well as the Utah environmental agency and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, as it continues to look at potential sources for the mercury in the fish.

Utah also is looking at reasons for mercury contamination in fish in that state.

NDEP spokesman Dante Pistone said Idaho informed the Nevada agency of the contaminated test results.

Along with considering the gold mines as a source, Idaho DEQ is looking at whether the cause may be local, regional or global.

Nevada Mining Association President Russ Fields said in a recent talk in Elko that mercury is naturally occurring and often found where there is gold. Mercury also could be in the atmosphere from as far away as China, according to experts.

"It's a real detective story," McIntyre said.

Great Basin Mine Watch stated earlier it believes mercury emissions from waste rock and dust at gold mines also should be controlled, as well as air emissions from processing plants.

The environmental organization is asking the state for stronger regulations than NDEP's draft proposal, including continuous mercury emission monitoring.

According to sister newspaper The Times-News in Twin Falls, Idaho, the Idaho DEQ and EPA are conducting a yearlong mercury monitoring program at Salmon Creek Falls Reservoir, mercury is a neurotoxin especially harmful to pregnant women and children.

They are exposed to the mercury if they eat fish with high concentrations of methyl mercury, which is what mercury becomes when it enters water.

U.S. Geological Survey also collected sediment samples from the reservoir for testing, The Times-News reported.

McIntyre earlier told the Twin Falls newspaper the sampling equipment must be very sensitive to detect mercury. In fact, just a tiny amount of mercury found in the dental fillings of the person using the equipment could alter results.

-- CLOSE WINDOW --