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Las Vegas SUN

March 11, 2006

Little common ground on gold, mercury

State orders annual checks; many say new rules not enough

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Las Vegas Sun

On one point, environmentalists and Nevada's hard-rock miners agree: Gold mining produces waste mercury.

On virtually every other point, the two camps are far apart - a fact made apparent when they squared off this week in Reno.

The occasion was a discussion of new Nevada rules to curtail airborne mercury emissions from mines, which are dug deep into Central and Northern Nevada.

Mining industry representatives said there is no hard evidence that Nevada's mines are responsible for elevated mercury levels across the Intermountain West. Some miners even dispute that mercury poses a danger to humans.

Nonetheless, the industry welcomed the new rules, which will turn a voluntary emissions-control program into a mandatory one covering all gold mines operating in the state.

Environmentalists from four Western states said the rules don't promise cuts to mercury emissions, and may in fact open the door for increases.

The rules target "point-source" mercury sites such as smokestacks, the environmentalists complain, but do nothing about other sources - so-called "fugitive" mercury released in the gold production process that also is airborne and can be carried into neighboring states.

Mines are not required to install emission-control technology for a least three years, although the state will provide incentives to act sooner. But when the equipment is installed, mining companies will be required to test emissions just once a year.

Environmentalists said that annual testing gives mining companies the chance to clean up their

operations just for those infrequent tests. Cheap, reliable equipment exists to test at least monthly, conservationists said.

The industry and state regulators, however, convinced the State Environmental Commission to vote for the rules. Leo Drozdoff, top man at the Nevada Environmental Protection Department, told the 11-member board that while regulators would try to improve the program in the future, establishing something now was better than no program at all.

"There are still a lot of moving pieces and change is inevitable," he said at Wednesday's meeting. "The program will likely need some fine tuning."

The program builds on an existing voluntary program that has cut mercury production between 60 percent and 82 percent, depending on whether you use the state's higher figure or the environmentalists' lower one.

Drozdoff dismissed calls for more research and for the state to establish standards for the acceptable level of mercury allowed in the environment. Limiting emissions at the source is the best alternative at the moment, the industry says.

But Glenn Miller, a UNR professor of natural resources, said the rules fall far short and the stakes are quite high. "Mercury is a highly toxic element," he said. "It doesn't transform into something innocuous. It is always toxic."

Elyssa Rosen, an analyst with Great Basin Mine Watch, chided the industry and the state for obscuring real problems with mercury.

Modern gold mining is "moving metals out of a system where they were stable to a system where they are not," she said. "Nevada, with arguably the worst mercury issue, is moving forward with a program that has no commitment to reductions."

She said that even with the program in place, an increase in gold mining - which might be driven by the 20-year-high in gold prices - or exploitation of gold deposits with high levels of accompanying mercury could lead to an increase in the amount of mercury produced in the state.

Roger Featherstone, an activist with Tucson-based Earthworks, a national environmental group, said that despite the promises from the state that the rules would be updated, meaningful revisions would be unlikely. "It is much more difficult to change existing rules than to do it right the first time," he said.

Bill Kholmoos, president of Reno's Barium Products and Mining Co., disputed the dangers of mercury described by the federal government and numerous medical studies.

"We played with it. It has always been around." He and his colleagues worked for years in a Bald

Mountain mercury mine, "and it never bothered us," he said.

He described one co-worker who would swallow a spoonful of the metallic liquid as a laxative. "If you say the word mercury, people go into a panic," he said. "Look at how dangerous it is, really."

Russ Fields, president of the Nevada Mining Association, said that despite Kohlmoos' argument and uncertainty over the effects of the mining industry on the environmental disposition of the metal, regulations are needed.

"We have no argument that controlling mercury emissions is an extremely important endeavor," he said. "There may be further steps to take but let's get these wins while we can."

John Mudge, environmental affairs director for industry giant Newmont Mining, said that testing emissions once a year would give an accurate assessment, and would be "quite an ordeal" for the companies.

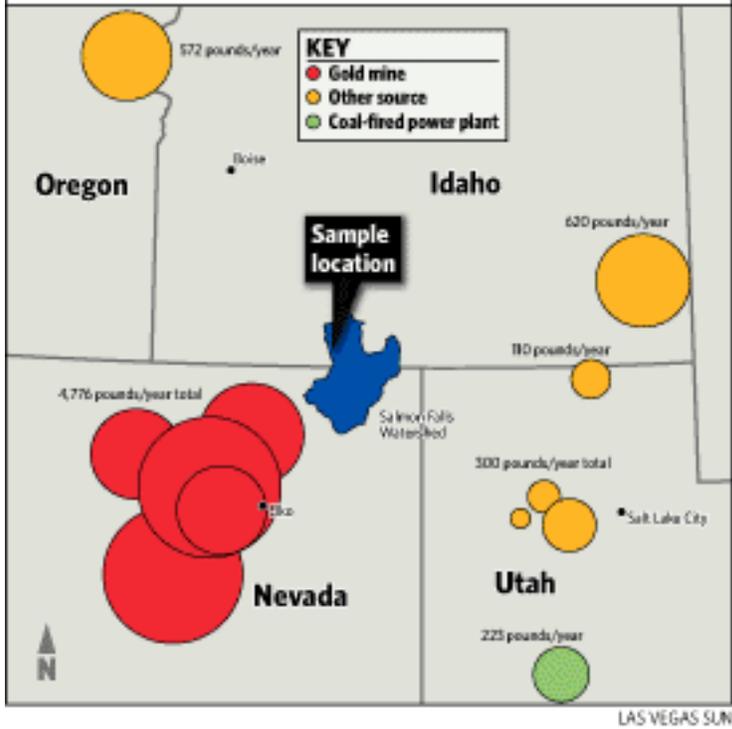
After the meeting, he said the regulations will have a real impact.

"What seems to be lost on all of the reporters out there is that this new rule mandates that we put in 'maximum achievable control technology' on every mercury source," Mudge said. "I don't understand why the environmental community opposed this rule. They're not suggesting anything better."

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Mercury contamination

A sample taken in the Salmon Falls Watershed found high concentrations of mercury in smallmouth bass, walleye and yellow perch. The Idaho National Laboratory noted that the watershed is downwind of Nevada gold mines, but could not pinpoint the source of the mercury pollution.



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