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Nevada tightens mercury controls

Requiring compliance: The move aims to reduce pollution that seeps into Utah and other states

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Nevada is transforming a voluntary program to control mercury pollution from mining operations into mandatory regulations.

Utahns, concerned that some of the mercury may be drifting into their lakes and streams, are applauding the move, which was formally announced last week.

The Nevada regulations are intended to reduce the mercury drifting beyond the state's borders. The plants spout about one-tenth of the mercury reported in the United States.

In Utah, where the Great Salt Lake contains some of the highest mercury measurements ever recorded, regulators have warned against eating certain fish and waterfowl from several locations because of toxic mercury contamination.

Jeff Salt, director of the Great Salt Lakekeeper, an environmental organization, said the Nevada companies had previously suggested their mercury emissions touch down way beyond Utah. So, it is positive they are taking responsibility for the mercury through the new state regulations, said Salt, a member of Utah's Mercury Working Group.

"Having a regulatory component is probably more meaningful in terms of compliance," he said. "Hopefully, it won't bog down in bureaucracy and lawsuits."

Nevada developed its proposed regulations with input from the industry. Under a voluntary program, four Nevada gold companies already have reduced annual mercury emissions to about 3,755 pounds. In 2001, they released an estimated 21,098 pounds.

Toronto-based Barrick Gold Corp. took part in the voluntary program and supports the added mercury monitoring and controls that will be imposed under the new regulations, according to company spokesman Vincent Borg.

"Mercury is a worldwide issue, and we need to do our part," he said.

Toxic methyl mercury builds up in the food chain. In high concentrations, it can cause neurological damage.

U.S. environmental and health officials have suggested limiting consumption of contaminated fish, especially by women of child-bearing age, babies and young children, and nearly four dozen states have issued consumption warnings for fish caught in their states.

Utah's mercury problem burst into public view only last spring. Now, researchers and policymakers are trying to discover where the mercury is coming from and what can be done to protect the environment from further damage.

Nevada gold-plant emissions are a suspected source, but Chinese power plants, natural releases and other sources also might be significant factors. So, Nevada's steps to control emissions now are seen as an important neighborly gesture.

"Obviously, we welcome" Nevada's new program, said Rick Sprott, director of the Utah Division of Air Quality. "But there is a lot more work to be done."

Sprott also noted that Utahns will have an opportunity to weigh in on the proposal during a public comment period on the proposed regulations.

Cindy Anderson, spokeswoman for the Nevada Department of Environmental Protection, said Utah was among the stakeholders who helped shape her state's approach to the new mercury controls. So were representatives from Idaho government, four offices of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and environmental groups.

She said no specific schedule has been set for reviewing the proposal, but regulators hope to have the review done in time for an expected January meeting of Nevada's State Environmental Commission. Information about Nevada's proposed regulation is available at <http://www.ndep.nv.gov/mercury>.

"The Nevada Mercury Air Emissions Control Program addresses an area that we at NDEP can control - regulation of mercury air emissions from thermal units at precious metal mining operations," said Colleen Cripps, deputy director of the Nevada Department of Environmental Protection.

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