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Toxic pollutants in Nevada down 33 percent, EPA says

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CARSON CITY, Nev. (AP) - A federal report released Thursday says toxic chemicals released in Nevada decreased 33 percent between 2003 and 2004 - but a watchdog group says that's cold comfort given a 2004 release of nearly 4 million pounds of mercury from mines.

The Environmental Protection Agency said the amount of toxic chemicals released into the environment in Nevada dropped from about 400 million pounds in 2003 to just over 266 million pounds in 2004.

Most of the releases were onto land. Air releases accounted for 1.8 million pounds of the total, down 3 percent; while water releases accounted for 107,890 pounds, up 5 percent.

The biggest releases came from mines. Newmont Mining Corp. operations based in Humboldt and Eureka counties, led with a combined 104.9 million pounds, followed by Couer Rochester Inc., operating in Pershing County, with 85.3 million pounds, and Barrick Goldstrike Mines Inc. in Elko County with about 52 million pounds.

A breakdown of the 266 million pounds of toxic chemicals shows that lead compounds accounted for nearly 106 million pounds while arsenic compounds accounted for about 99 million pounds of the total. Zinc and manganese compounds were listed at nearly 30 million pounds while mercury amounted to more than 3.9 million pounds.

Other chemical amounts included: copper compounds, 3 million pounds; toluene, 1.2 million pounds; chromium compounds, 4.1 million pounds; nitrate compounds, 3.3 million pounds; and nickel compounds, 2.9 million pounds.

Elyssa Rosen, senior policy adviser for Great Basin Mine Watch, said the watchdog group was particularly concerned about mercury, which typically is released into the atmosphere during roasting and other refining processes.

Studies have linked high mercury levels in humans to developmental delays, blindness and, in extreme cases, death. A National Institute of Health study in 2005 that showed that up to 637,000 of the 4 million children born in the United States each year have been exposed to mercury above the EPA's safety level.

"Nevada remains the nation's top mercury hot spot, releasing more mercury into the air and water and onto the land than any other state," Rosen said, adding that the state adopted new rules governing such releases last month but they let the mines "do business as usual."

"This is a serious policy problem and a very serious health problem," Rosen added. "These (mercury) numbers are not going down."

Dante Pistone, spokesman for the state Division of Environmental Protection, said the numbers in the federal EPA report are two years old, predate the new state regulation and "are not really very relevant to the future picture."

"Give the regulations time to work," Pistone added. "There are mandatory controls at all sources for mercury. The best available control technology has to be installed."

Wayne Natri, the EPA's administrator for the Pacific Southwest region, said he was "pleased" to report the overall decrease of toxic chemical releases in Nevada.

Natri added the report helps regulators, businesses and communities "remain aware of the types and amounts of chemicals being used in neighborhoods throughout the country."

While government officials see the latest report as an encouraging trend, the EPA is also trying to quit forcing companies to report small releases of toxic pollutants and allow them to submit reports on their pollution less frequently.

The EPA wants Congress to require the accounting every other year instead of annually. The EPA's annual Toxics Release Inventory began under a 1986 community right-to-know law.

On the Net:

Environmental Protection Agency: <http://www.epa.gov/tri/tridata/tri04/index.htm>

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