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Otter: Pollution trading program still unfit for Idaho

The governor also wants the DEQ to expand its efforts with surrounding states to reduce mercury emissions.

Gov. Butch Otter wants to keep Idaho out of a mercury pollution trading program promoted by the Bush Administration. The program would allow companies to build mercury polluting coal-fired power plants in Idaho simply by buying pollution rights. Former Idaho Gov. Jim Risch first pulled Idaho out of the program in 2006, helping to kill a proposed coal-fired plant near Twin Falls.

"I believe it was the right decision at that time, and I believe it is still the appropriate course of action for the near future," Otter said in a recent letter to Joan Cloonan, chairman of the state's Board of Environmental Quality.

Otter also endorsed his Department of Environmental Quality's efforts to work with surrounding states to reduce mercury pollution, and he has told DEQ Director Toni Hardesty to expand the effort.

"The reduction of overall mercury in the state is affected by factors outside state borders," Otter wrote.

Idaho officials and environmentalists have been pressing Nevada gold mines to reduce mercury emissions that accumulate in fish and can cause brain damage and learning disabilities in babies and young children. They also are concerned about mercury pollution drifting east from Ash Grove Cement's plant in Durkee, Ore., 100 miles west of Boise.

The plant, southeast of Baker City, emits up to 2,153 pounds of mercury annually — 10 times the amount expected from a typical coal-fired electric power plant.

Idaho's mercury monitoring program discovered in 2005 that mercury levels in the air south of Twin Falls rose 30 to 70 percent higher than normal levels when winds blew from the southwest, where the Nevada gold mines are located.

It also found higher than normal mercury levels in Salmon Falls Creek Reservoir near Nevada's border.

The reservoir is one of Idaho's water bodies where health officials have issued fish-consumption advisories, warning women of child-bearing age and children to eat only one fish meal a week because of mercury contamination.

Nevada, under pressure from Idaho and Utah officials, instituted a mandatory mercury clean-up program at mines in 2006. It required all mines that emitted major levels of mercury to use the best available technology for cutting emissions.

The program already is finding that several mines are emitting more mercury than earlier believed.

Idaho, Utah and Nevada are working on a pact to share data and cooperate on mercury control programs. Otter wants Oregon and Washington involved, as well.

"Clearly mercury is a regional issue for all of us," Hardesty said. "It only makes sense that we work collectively on this."

At Otter's bidding, Hardesty also is bringing together industry, environmentalists and others in an effort to see whether the state can develop its own program to reduce mercury emissions statewide.

"Regardless of what happens at the federal level, I believe DEQ should continue its work on the mercury issue," Otter wrote. "This effort should include an evaluation of existing rules and regulations."

Monsanto's phosphate plant in Soda Springs is the state's top mercury source, emitting 600 to 800 pounds annually.

The Idaho Conservation League has spearheaded efforts to force Nevada to address mercury pollution from mines. Justin Hayes, the group's program director, praised Otter for keeping mercury from becoming a part of "political agendas instead of human health agendas."

"This is very important that he's keeping DEQ in control of these issues," Hayes said.

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