

## Mercury levels stir new outcry

By Judy Fahys  
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Environmentalists point to the federal government's new tally of toxic pollution as proof regulators are too soft on mining, especially Nevada's gold companies.

Elyssa Rosen, senior policy adviser at Great Basin Mine Watch, said the latest information ought to raise concern, particularly among Utah and Idaho residents whose lakes and streams are being contaminated with mercury drifting from Nevada gold mines. Her group, examining newly released data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Toxics Release Inventory for 2004, noted that Nevada remains the nation's mercury hot spot, releasing more of the toxic metal into the air and water and onto the land than any other state.

"We're feeling very concerned about populations downwind of Nevada," she said, noting that children are most vulnerable to the effects of toxic mercury. "We will be supporting efforts around the region to improve the situation."

Nevada's mercury and mercury-compound releases accounted for 3.9 million pounds of the 4.6 million pounds released nationwide in 2004, the latest year for which the tally is available.

Meanwhile, Utah companies reported emitting 27,601 pounds of mercury into the air, land and water, says the report the EPA released on Wednesday.

Last month, the Nevada Environmental Commission approved the first mercury controls for the gold industry, whose largest companies have operated under voluntary curbs for four years.

Dante Pistone, spokesman for the Nevada Division of Environmental Protection, said the pending regulations will apply to all gold plants and require the best available controls.

"The 2004 numbers are just a snapshot in time," he said, "and they don't reflect what's happening now or what will be happening in the future."

He said Nevada's mercury numbers have declined by about one-third since then. "We understand the concern about mercury, but it is being addressed."

Utah last year issued five mercury warnings concerning state wildlife. Health and environmental officials urged limited consumption of channel catfish from the Green River in Desolation Canyon; largemouth bass from Gunlock Reservoir in Washington County; and brown trout from Mill Creek in Grand County. They also said mercury was so high in two duck species - the northern shoveler and common goldeneye - that none should be eaten.

Mercury becomes toxic when it biochemically transforms into methylmercury. When ingested, generally by eating contaminated fish, it builds up and can cause neurological problems. Pregnant and nursing women and young children are generally thought to be most vulnerable.

Gold mines are highly suspected as a major source of mercury in the Great Salt Lake, where methylmercury has been detected in some of the highest levels ever measured.

Tim Wagner of the Utah chapter of the Sierra Club said the 2004 inventory indicates the problem is as worrisome as some suspected.

"This new data reflects a pretty serious problem and that the state of Nevada should strengthen their [mercury reduction] rules to include mandatory reductions of mercury emissions."

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