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State holds course on mercury

Officials request no special funding to address high levels of pollution

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State environmental officials requested no additional money this year to tackle Utah's mercury problem.

Instead, to begin understanding how toxic mercury lands in Utah and what hazard it might pose, they plan to study the issue using existing staff, current budgets, federal collaborations and, perhaps, a research grant.

Some Utahns are already wondering if that's enough to get a handle on the problem, which burst into Utah's consciousness earlier this year as a top environmental problem after reports that the Great Salt Lake has some of the worst mercury pollution ever reported in the United States.

"Mercury is a huge issue," said Jane Bowman, a Salt Lake City obstetrician and gynecologist. "I can't imagine it does not warrant additional funding," considering how widespread the contamination appears to be.

Although mercury is a naturally occurring metal, it can become toxic when biochemical processes transform it into methylmercury. Methylmercury builds up in the food chain, accumulating in muscle tissue and putting people and wildlife at risk.

High levels of mercury are linked to birth defects and death in birds and fish. In humans, too much can cause brain and nervous system damage. And lower exposures can cause nausea, muscle weakness and memory loss.

When the state declared in October that two species of ducks should not be eaten because of high mercury, Pete Idstrom of Salt Lake City faced a quandary.

A duck hunter, he subscribed to the belief that hunters should eat their catch. But mercury levels in birds he has shot on the Great Salt Lake were so high, he refused to feed them to his young family. Instead, he donated the birds to state wildlife officers for research.

"I would like to see them spend more," Idstrom said of state government. "It would be nice to find out if there is anything we can do about it."

After a limited testing program this year, the state also issued consumption advisories for fish caught in two streams in eastern Utah and one reservoir in the southwestern corner of the state.

One problem facing the state is that the Great Salt Lake ecosystem is unique. The lessons learned in the Midwest because of mercury from power plants do not automatically apply in the desert West.

Meanwhile, millions of birds rely on the Great Salt Lake and its brine shrimp each year for a layover in migration. Not only are the lake's mercury levels - especially its methylmercury levels - extraordinarily high, but no one is sure why or how it cycles in the system.

The Statewide Mercury Work Group has been organized to look for answers. Its 15 members - who come from industry, government and advocacy groups - are setting priorities on the research that needs to be done.

John Whitehead, the assistant director of the state Division of Water Quality who heads the task force, confirmed that state agencies have not requested additional state funding for mercury research in the proposed 2006 budget.

When wildlife officers catch fish and birds for other programs, they can take additional samples for mercury tests, he said. And the state can piggyback its research on studies done by the U.S. Geological Survey and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, he said.

The federal wildlife agency has \$30,000 to study mercury in eared grebes, a migratory bird that spends three to four months a year on the Great Salt Lake beginning in September. That money is expected to yield about \$120,000 worth of work after in-kind donations.

In addition, the state water-quality agency is joining with the Great Salt Lake Alliance, federal agencies and the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources in seeking a \$105,000 grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. With matching funds of \$37,000 in-kind or in cash, it would cover about \$142,000 in study costs.

"We're supposed to hear back from EPA in late spring whether it's a go or no-go," said Whitehead.

The state does not have plans to step up air monitoring, which might help determine if Nevada gold mines are sending the mercury to Utah, as some suspect. State officials say they are not certain yet what tests would help most, and they hope to get some useful data from a new stack monitoring program that Nevada has proposed for its gold ore plants.

Whitehead said the state is focusing its efforts on the most likely sources of human exposure to mercury, that is, the fish and waterfowl people are most likely to eat.

The state Health Department spent \$50,000 this year on a device that tests for mercury. Using the device will make getting results easier and faster.

Some observers wonder if this will be enough.

The Utah Anglers Association's Ed Kent said the public needs to know how serious the problem is.

"Maybe it's an issue we need to pursue at the Legislature this year," he said.

Bonnie Gestring thinks it's important for Utah to make the mercury research a priority.

A Montana-based advocate with Earthworks, one of the environmental groups that threatened to sue the EPA last year to insist on new emission controls for the gold industry, she noted the health of Utahns, their wildlife and the environment is at stake.

"It [the research] is clearly something that needs to happen to ensure the public health is protected," she said.

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