

Florida Panthers Found With High Mercury Levels

Biologists from the Florida Panther Interagency Committee are currently evaluating the significance of high levels of mercury found in the livers of Florida panthers.

After finding a mercury level of 110 parts per million (ppm) in the liver of a dead panther, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) conducted additional tests on various tissues of other dead panthers. Test results from the livers of 11 dead panthers ranged from .049 to 20 ppm.

The Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission also conducted tissue sample tests and is awaiting results. The agencies conducted 33 tests on various tissues, including hair samples, from live panthers. Panthers from various locations across their south Florida range were tested.

The Florida Panther Interagency Committee is composed of the USFWS, NPS, the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, and the Department of Natural Resources. Significance of high mercury levels in panthers and how it will affect their chances for survival are among issues being reviewed.

"Now that we know the mercury problem in Florida affects the panther, we can work together to analyze the situation and decide what to do," said John Christian of USFWS. "These data represent the first evidence of mercury working its way high up in the south Florida food chain and put additional emphasis on the importance of finding the source of the contamination and taking corrective action."

Mercury concentrations of 0.5 ppm or higher in fish have prompted health officials to urge people to limit or discontinue consumption of fish from affected waters throughout Florida. Mercury contamination also prompted the Commission to cancel authorized alligator hunting in certain areas of south Florida in September.

It was the female panther known to scientists at Number 27 that carried the mercury level of 110 ppm. She was found dead in Everglades NP in July. At the time, scientists could not determine the cause of death. They now think she may have died of mercury poisoning.

"We know for a fact that Number 27 fed primarily on raccoons," said Oron L. "Sonny" Bass, research biologist with Everglades NP. "Since raccoons are mainly fish-eaters, we suspected this panther accumulated a lethal amount of mercury through the aquatic food chain."