

# High mercury levels found in 3 panthers

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A new finding of abnormally high mercury concentrations in the livers of three South Florida panthers has prompted wildlife experts to explore its causes, examine its effects and consider ways to reduce the risk of future poisoning for the endangered cats.

The Panther Recovery Project in Gainesville has studied the mercury levels found in the livers of 11 panthers that died for a variety of causes during the past 10 years. The alarming results of its study: Three of the panthers had mercury concentrations of about 20 parts per million — about 200 times the level found in other panthers.

"What it means is that some Florida panthers are carrying body burdens of mercury that isn't natural," said John Christian, a deputy assistant regional director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "We don't know how that is affecting them. But we do know the cats are continuing to have kittens."

The panther population is estimated at 30 to 50 cats.

The contaminated panthers in the Gainesville study came from the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve in the Big Cypress Swamp region. And it's the second time wildlife officials have found high mercury levels in panthers.

The first time was in July, when a dead panther was found in the Everglades National Park area. Its mercury level was 110 parts per million, a level so high that it may have been the cause of death.

"It's presumably all linked to the fish, although we don't know," said wildlife biologist Tom Atcheson.

Earlier this year, the state advised people to stop eating bass from the Everglades after tests showed mercury levels as high as 3 parts per million. That's triple the level considered safe by the U.S. government.

Biologists speculate that panthers may be getting the mercury in a roundabout way: The contaminated fish are eaten by raccoons and armadillos, who are then eaten by the panthers.

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