

High mercury levels found in panther

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Discovery of a potentially lethal amount of mercury in a dead Florida panther is prompting a round of testing to see if the problem is widespread.

Panthers are one of Florida's most endangered animals. There are only 30 to 50 wild panthers remaining in south Florida and they have an extremely low reproductive rate.

In August, one female panther died of undetermined causes in Everglades National Park. Testing recently uncovered toxic levels of mercury in the panther's liver, said John Oberheu with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Atlanta.

Tests showed amounts ranging from 98 to 110 parts per million, or far in excess of levels that are lethal for humans. Adult panthers weigh between 60 to 130 pounds. A study of a community of Japanese fishermen in 1956 showed that they were dying of amounts ranging from 2 to 70 parts per million, Oberheu said.

The fishermen were eating mercury-contaminated fish. Their pet cats also were nearly exterminated by the problem.

In Florida, there is concern that mercury might be passing through the food chain — starting with fish — and being picked up by panthers. Mercury becomes concentrated farther up the food chain and panthers are a top predator.

"We can't say that is what caused her death," Oberheu said. But he added that because there are so few panthers, state and federal officials are hurriedly testing preserved remains of 10 other panthers from south Florida. Results are expected in three weeks.

"What happens to panthers could be a signal for what is happening to other creatures," Oberheu said.

Mercury also is being found in large-mouth bass in the Upper St. Johns River and other parts of Florida. On Tuesday the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services cautioned fishermen to limit consumption of bass from the Upper St. Johns, which includes Brevard County.

M E R C U R Y: "IN FLORIDA, MUNICIPAL INCINERATORS APPARENTLY ARE THE LARGEST SOURCE OF MERCURY POLLUTION, annually spewing an estimated 20,582 pounds of mercury vapor into the air. There are five such incinerators, operated by Dade, Hillsborough, Pinellas and Bay counties, plus the city of Tampa. All the plants have pollution control devices called 'electrostatic precipitators' that are designed to collect ash particles but have no effect on gases such as mercury vapor. The state does not routinely monitor those plants for mercury emissions. But a DER official said tests on one of three incinerators in the Pinellas unit indicated 0.31 of a pound of mercury was escaping into the air each hour of operation. That incinerator burned 1,000 tons of waste daily. Based on that rate, the Pinellas unit — which is burning a total of 2,427 tons of refuse daily — emits 6,598 pounds of mercury each year. Assuming similar hourly rates for the other facilities, taking into account the volumes of waste that each burns, these estimates of annual mercury pollution can be calculated: Dade County, 6,789 pounds; Hillsborough County, 2,987 pounds; Tampa, 2,715 pounds; and Bay County (Panama City), 1,493 pounds... Incinerator operators are not required to remove products containing mercury before burning them, but Buck Owen, assistant director of the DER's air resources division, said recent legislation will require the plants to recycle a percentage of products containing mercury. Own also said five new incinerators being built will remove such items before burning and will have more sophisticated pollution-control devices, called 'dry scrubbers.' They may be more effective in limiting mercury emissions. Some tests estimate dry scrubbers can remove 70% of the mercury. But there are indications the devices may not be as effective as backers claim. 'A couple of facilities in California have dry scrubbers...and instead of collecting 70% of the mercury, the collection rate is dropping off to zero,' said Ray Morrison, mercury project officer in the EPA's Atlanta office." The Orlando Sentinel, June 25, 1989.