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Report Shows Extent of Mercury Pollution More Widespread

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Wildlife Ranging from Eagles and Warblers to Turtles and Bullfrogs at Risk

Mercury pollution is making its way into nearly every habitat in the U.S., exposing countless species of wildlife to potentially harmful levels of mercury, according to a new report from the National Wildlife Federation (NWF).

Poisoning Wildlife: The Reality of Mercury Pollution is a compilation of over 65 published studies finding elevated levels of mercury in a wide range of wildlife species. The report highlights mercury levels in fish, mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians living in freshwater, marine, and forest habitats from across the country.

"The NWF report presents an alarming account of mercury contamination in Louisiana and nationally," said Randy Lanctot with the Louisiana Wildlife Federation (LWF). "From songbirds and shorebirds to black bass and bullfrogs, mercury is accumulating in nearly every strand of the food web."

The accumulation of mercury in fish has been well-understood for years, leading Louisiana and 45 other states in the U.S. to issue consumption advisories warning people to limit or avoid eating certain species of fish. However, scientists have recently discovered that mercury accumulates in forest soils, indicating that wildlife that live and feed outside of aquatic habitats are also at risk of exposure to mercury.

Scientific understanding of the extent of mercury contamination in wildlife has expanded significantly in recent years," says Dr. David Evers of the Biodiversity Research Institute, wildlife toxicologist and leading researcher in this field. "We are finding mercury accumulation in far more species, and at much higher levels, than we previously thought was occurring. This poses a very real threat to the health of many wildlife populations, some of which are highly endangered."

Mercury accumulation in fish is not only a concern of the fish-consuming public, it also poses a threat to the fish themselves.

Poisoning Wildlife assembles findings from over 20 published studies that have identified adverse health conditions and/or behavior abnormalities of fish, birds, and mammals with elevated mercury levels, e. g., fish with high mercury levels have difficulty schooling and spawning, birds lay fewer eggs and have trouble caring for their chicks, and mammals have impaired motor skills that affect their ability to hunt and find food.

Several states have already taken action to reduce mercury pollution from major sources like waste incinerators, chlorine manufacturers, power plants, and consumer products, and the results are very promising. In places where mercury emissions have been cut, such as Florida, Wisconsin, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts, mercury levels in fish and wildlife downwind have been reduced in a matter of years, not decades, as scientists have previously thought.

In Louisiana, the state Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), in cooperation with the Departments of Health and Hospitals and Wildlife and Fisheries has had a mercury monitoring program in place for many years, posting fish advisories currently in affect on 42 individual or complexes of waterbodies that essentially includes every region of the state. Information on Louisiana's mercury program is available on the DEQ website at

www.deq.louisiana.gov/portal/Default.aspx?tabid=287

New legislation adopted in 2006 (Act 126, the Louisiana Mercury Risk Reduction Act) authorizes DEQ to establish programs to reduce, recycle and manage mercury waste and encourage the use of alternatives to mercury in the manufacture of products, including a prohibition on sale of some mercury-containing products, labeling of products with mercury content, disclosure of mercury content by the seller of such products, prohibition on discharges of mercury to water or wastewater except when done in compliance with water pollution control requirements, prohibition on crushing motor vehicles and shredding appliances without removing or verifying the removal of mercury-containing products, and a public mercury-reduction education and outreach program among other provisions of the act. It does not address the use of mercury in dental fillings, or emissions from coal-fired power plants, acknowledged to be the single greatest source nationally of mercury contamination in the environment.

The greatest source of mercury in Louisiana's soil, water and fish and wildlife is fallout from emissions of mercury into the air from incineration, coal-fired power generation and other combustion processes. Although much of this drifts in on air currents from other states and even Mexico, four power plants in Louisiana are significant sources of mercury emissions - Big Cajun 2 (Pointe Coupee), Dolet Hills (DeSoto), Nelson Coal (Calcasieu) and Rodemacher (Rapides). Federal Clean Air Act regulations will ratchet down mercury emissions by the year 2020, but it is predicted that Louisiana plants will have to purchase mercury reduction credits from plants in other states under the "cap and trade" provisions of the federal mercury rule in order to be in compliance since anticipated emission reduction technology applications here will not allow standards to be met at the plant sites. That could change based on new rules, cost factors and/or the emergence of more thrifty and effective technology, but in the meantime wildlife continues to be exposed.