
Issue Brief – Mercury Source Assessment

TEQNG IB 02

SUMMARY

The mission of the Department of Environmental Quality is to safeguard public health and quality of life by protecting and improving the environment while considering the benefits to public health, the impacts on economic development, property, wildlife, tourism, business, agriculture, forests, and other interests. One area addressed by the Department is mercury contamination.

The Analyst recommends that the Transportation, Environmental Quality, and National Guard Appropriations Subcommittee consider funding \$62,000 from the General Fund for mercury source assessment.

DISCUSSION

The Department of Environmental Quality has discovered in recent years increased levels of mercury in the environment particularly in fish and waterfowl along the shores and wetlands of the Great Salt Lake. The Great Salt Lake has the first in the nation mercury advisory for waterfowl (Northern Shoveler, Cinnamon Teal, and Common Goldeneye). These mercury levels observed in the Great Salt Lake are some of the highest values ever seen in North America.

There are currently 9 locations that have a health advisory for mercury in fish. Currently the Department's fish tissue sampling and analysis is beyond the core sampling program established by EPA for state water quality programs and the EPA has not provided additional funds for this sampling. Citizens are anxious to know what the source of Utah's mercury problem is and what can be done to minimize it.

The Legislature appropriated \$66,500 one-time from the General Fund for FY 2008 to begin the process of taking samples and testing those samples. A source assessment protocol has been developed by the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) that defines the origin and extent of the problem in selected streams, lakes, and reservoirs across the State of Utah. The Department has purchased a mercury analyzer for the State Health Laboratory to eliminate any backlog issues of sending samples out of state for testing. A total of 1,171 samples have been taken from 220 locations including 165 streams and 55 lakes and reservoirs across the State of Utah. Eleven percent of these samples (125 samples) have been above the health level of concern of 0.3 ppm.

The Department is requesting \$62,000 ongoing General Funds for continued source assessment to sample and test lakes, streams and reservoirs.

LEGISLATIVE ACTION

The Analyst recommends that the Transportation, Environmental Quality, and National Guard Appropriations Subcommittee consider funding \$62,000 from the General Fund for mercury source assessment.