

Nacimiento Water Project

Fact Sheet on the Mercury Issue at Nacimiento Reservoir

Revised January 2011

Has mercury been detected at Nacimiento Reservoir?

At Nacimiento Reservoir, mercury has been detected in fish caught in the lake, and also in soil and sediments at some inactive mercury mines in the watershed. Mercury mining occurred in the Nacimiento Reservoir watershed from the late 1800s through the mid-1900s. Mercury has not been mined in the Nacimiento Reservoir watershed since 1970.

Is there mercury in the water?

Testing for mercury in the reservoir near the Nacimiento Water Project intake structure site (where water is taken from the reservoir for delivery to project participants) began in 1993 and has been conducted routinely since then. All results have been below 0.5 parts per billion. The allowable limit for mercury in drinking water is two parts per billion. In other words, the *untreated* lake water at the intake structure already meets the *treated* drinking water standard for mercury.

What if mercury shows up in the water in the future?

Mercury does not dissolve freely in water. If mercury were to be detected in a water sample, it would be associated with a particle (soil or organic matter) which would be removed by filtration either in a percolation pond or by a state approved water treatment plant before the water is delivered to consumers.

Is it safe to eat fish from Nacimiento Reservoir?

According to the California Department of Public Health (CDPH), some, but not all, fish may be consumed safely, depending on the specific characteristics of the fish and of the consumer. CDPH issued its most recent fish advisory for Nacimiento Reservoir in 2009; that information can be found on the San Luis Obispo County Health Dept website. (<http://www.slocounty.ca.gov/health/publichealth/healthissues/lakenacfish.htm>).

Why is it OK to use Nacimiento Reservoir as a drinking water supply but it is not safe to eat some fish from the same reservoir?

Mercury is associated with soils and sediments; it does not dissolve freely in water, and therefore is not a threat to the drinking water supply. However, certain bacteria convert mercury from sediments into a form (methylmercury) that accumulates easily in body tissue. Methylmercury moves up the food chain until it accumulates in some fish at unsafe levels.

Is anything being done about the source of mercury contamination in the Nacimiento Reservoir watershed?

The Klau Mine and the Buena Vista Mine, located adjacent to each other on a major tributary to Nacimiento Reservoir, have been identified as the greatest contributors of mercury to the watershed. The Federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is currently conducting an investigation of the mines site and also of the waterways downstream of the mines (Las Tablas Creek and Nacimiento Reservoir). Once that investigation is complete, the EPA will develop a remediation plan designed to reduce contamination to acceptable levels.



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San Luis Obispo County Flood Control & Water Conservation District