

SIERRA NEVADA

Abandoned Mine Lands Facts

California's Gold Rush - beginning in 1849 - spawned population growth, new technology, and wealth in the state. However, legacy abandoned mine lands (AML) continue to impact our water bodies and us.

Mercury, sediment, and other substances from AML in the Sierra Nevada continue to travel downstream, impairing California's reservoirs and accumulating in the Sacramento – San Joaquin Delta and the San Francisco Bay.

- Over half of the inventoried AML sites in California are in the Sierra Nevada Region. Of those, more than 3,000 sites contain chemical hazards, including mercury.
- Between 10 and 30% of the 26 million pounds of mercury brought to the Sierra Nevada was lost to the environment during the gold recovery process.
- The majority of mercury impaired reservoirs are found in central California, many of which store water that comes from Sierra Nevada watersheds. As sedimentation reduces storage capacity, the presence of these toxins significantly complicates restoring capacity.

Mercury contamination and other legacy impacts from AML will continue to harm us until they are addressed. The Sierra Nevada Conservancy (SNC) and others are working to implement projects that remediate the impacts of AML.

Mercury from abandoned mine lands makes its way into the fish we eat.



Mercury Impairment in the Sierra Nevada

Mercury in its methylated form is a very serious health hazard.



Methylmercury is a neurotoxin that affects the nervous system leading to brain and nervous system damage as well as other impairments. Babies in the womb and young children are more sensitive to methylmercury exposure than adults.

- Methylmercury is a bio-accumulant entering the bottom of the food chain at low levels of concentration, but entering humans at high levels of concentration through the consumption of fish.
- Toxic levels of mercury in fish are present in more than 180 reservoirs and rivers in California, many in the Sierra Nevada Region.
- Individuals and communities who regularly eat fish as part of their culture or due to economic need are especially threatened by mercury contaminated fish.

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy is a state agency that carries out a mission of protecting the environment and economy in a complementary fashion across 25 million acres, one-quarter of the state.

To learn more, please visit the Sierra Nevada Conservancy Web site.

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