

## **Mercury Study Identifies Problem Spots**

The Associated Press

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Gorham, Maine - A four-year study in the northeastern United States and eastern Canada released on Tuesday identifies several so-called mercury "hot spots" and suggests contamination by the toxic metal is more pervasive than originally believed.

The nine hot spots - four of them in Maine - represent areas where high mercury levels have been recorded in fish, loons, eagles and animals.

"We expected mercury to be widespread, but we were surprised to discover just how high the mercury levels are in animals like mink," David Evers, executive director the Biodiversity Research Council, said in a statement.

The other hot spots are in New York's Adirondacks and the Merrimack River area in Massachusetts and New Hampshire, as well as three in Canada.

More than 50 scientists participated in the \$300,000 study, which was funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Northeastern States Research Cooperative.

For years, scientists and public policy makers have focused on mercury emitted from power plants and incinerators that falls into lakes and ponds, where it affects fish and waterfowl.

But the scientists found elevated mercury levels in Bicknell's thrushes, a small bird that lives in forests and has a distinctive song. That caused researchers to question whether mercury from the sky is wreaking havoc on forest ecosystems, as well.

Evers, who wrote the report Mercury Connections, helped conceive the research with Tom Clair of Environment Canada. The scientists analyzed existing data on mercury in animals, soil, rivers, lakes and streams.

"Until now, we thought that mercury in its toxic form was primarily a concern in water environments," Evers said. "Our discovery of mercury in forest songbirds turns that conventional wisdom on its head."

The hot spots were generally defined as areas with two or more species that had mercury levels above known thresholds for adverse health effects.

In Maine, they included the Rangeley Lakes region, Upper Penobscot River area and two regions in Down East Maine.

The Canadian hotspots are the La Maurice Area of Quebec Province, Kejimikujik National Park in Nova Scotia and central Nova Scotia, the report said.

The report was released a day after three northern New England senators called on the Environmental Protection Agency to strengthen a proposed rule intended to reduce mercury emissions from power plants. The agency is expected to issue the rule next week.

Sens. Olympia Snowe, R-Maine, Patrick Leahy, D-Vt. and James Jeffords, I-Vt., said two recent reports by internal government watchdogs that found flaws in EPA's analysis of the health effects of mercury on children.

"These two reports show that the administration ignored sound science and cut corners to justify the weaker mercury proposal that industry wanted," Leahy said in a statement Monday.

The Bush administration disputes a determination by the Clinton administration that mercury should be regulated as a hazardous substance and that about 450 power plants should be forced to buy the "maximum achievable control technology" to reduce it.

Instead, the EPA now favors an industry-backed proposal that would cap mercury pollution nationwide but let individual plants buy pollution rights from companies already in compliance.

The EPA said last month its proposal would cut mercury emissions from coal-burning power plants by 70 percent, from the current 48 tons a year to 15 tons a year, by 2018.