

Article

Bird's illness fuels debate on mercury

by Tammy Webber



Nursed back to health: Brad Feaster, a Department of Natural Resources worker, prepares to release the eagle after its treatment. -- Photo provided by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources

Some say eagle's poisoning strengthens case for limits on power plants; others not so sure.

When Evansville veterinarian Gregg Gormley first examined the bald eagle in June, the lethargic bird's wings drooped and it was unable to fly.

At first he suspected lead poisoning, common among eagles that eat other birds or fish contaminated with lead shot or sinkers. But he said blood tests found normal lead levels and no other apparent problems -- except one:

The eagle had elevated mercury levels, marking the first time in Indiana that a bird had been found with mercury poisoning.

Indiana power plants emit the fourth-greatest volume of mercury in the nation, according to a report this week from a national environmental group. The significance of the eagle's health problems, however, is up for debate.

"To me, this eagle is sending a very strong message that people should pay attention to," said Catherine Bowe, a mercury campaign manager at the National Wildlife Federation. She said Indiana is known for high mercury levels in fish, and "it's time to take mercury real seriously; it's scary stuff and it doesn't go away."

Some Indiana environmentalists say the case bolsters their arguments that the state must adopt strict mercury limits on coal-burning power plants, the greatest source of mercury emissions.

Others, however, say the case raises more questions than answers about how mercury is affecting Indiana's wildlife and, ultimately, the people who live here.

Indiana natural resources officials have no way of knowing whether the eagle's mercury levels were caused by eating Indiana fish. The eagle, a female, is an older bird and might have traveled a great distance, said Mark Pochon, property manager at the state's Hovey Lake Fish and Wildlife Area, whose officers rescued the bird after it was discovered by a farmer.

"She could have picked that up anywhere in country; they're travelers," he said. "Our hope is she picked it up over a very long time, but we will keep looking to see if there are any other (cases)."

There are 62 nesting pairs of bald eagles in Indiana, including a pair at Hovey Lake, said John Castrale, a state Department of Natural Resources bird expert.

Castrale said there are no known mercury hot spots in southwestern Indiana.

Still, state health officials advise pregnant women and children to avoid eating too many fish from most Indiana waterways because of mercury and PCB contamination. Mercury is a naturally occurring

metal that can become toxic after entering soil and water. The toxin, whose effects are magnified as it moves up the food chain, can damage the brains of fetuses, stunt central nervous system development and damage kidneys.

David Evers, a nationally known wildlife researcher, said that while mercury is a concern, he doesn't believe the toxin caused the Indiana eagle's problems. The bird's symptoms would have been irreversible because mercury irreparably damages the brain, said Evers, director and chief scientist at the Maine-based Biodiversity Research Institute.

The eagle recovered and was released in July after Gormley treated it with a chemical to which mercury binds and passes out of the body.

"I don't know what else it could be," said Gormley, who has treated wild birds for a decade. "There were no other physical changes" besides neurological problems, "and it's no secret there are sources of fish laden with mercury."

Evers suggested Gormley's treatment might have been effective on other potential causes of the eagle's sickness -- perhaps pesticides or a blue-green algae bloom.

"The important piece here is that something was making that bird sick . . . that is an indicator that something is not right in that system there," he said.

The area where the eagle was found, tucked near the Kentucky and Illinois borders at the confluence of the Wabash and Ohio rivers, has among the greatest concentrations of coal-fired power plants in the nation. Coal plants are among the greatest sources of airborne mercury in the country.

"I worry about the fact there's children and adults . . . in Indiana being seriously affected by mercury from coal-fired power plants," said John Blair, president of Evansville-based Valley Watch and one of the state's strongest proponents of a tough mercury rule.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said its rule would reduce mercury by about half by 2018. Blair and other environmental groups asked the state Air Pollution Control Board last year to require Indiana's coal-fired plants to reduce mercury emissions 90 percent by 2008.

Utility industry officials have said the technology doesn't yet exist to achieve such reductions, and that the federal plan would help keep Indiana's energy rates among the lowest in the country. About 95 percent of Indiana's electricity is generated by coal.

A group of regulators, utility officials and environmental groups has met to debate the question since last year, but a decision has not been made.

Meanwhile, Gormley said, the eagle seems to be thriving. "She's still around, up in the trees and flying."

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