

High mercury levels found in panther

OCTOBER 26, 1989

By Elliott Jones
FLORIDA TODAY

Discovery of a potentially lethal amount of mercury in a dead Florida panther is prompting a round of testing to see if the problem is widespread.

Panthers are one of Florida's most endangered animals. There are only 30 to 50 wild panthers remaining in south Florida and they have an extremely low reproductive rate.

In August, one female panther died of undetermined causes in Everglades National Park. Testing recently uncovered toxic levels of mercury in the panther's liver, said John Oberheu with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Atlanta.

Tests showed amounts ranging from 98 to 110 parts per million, or far in excess of levels that are lethal for humans. Adult panthers weigh between 60 to 130 pounds. A study of a community of Japanese fishermen in 1956 showed that they were dying of amounts ranging from 2 to 70 parts per million, Oberheu said.

The fishermen were eating mercury-contaminated fish. Their pet cats also were nearly exterminated by the problem.

In Florida, there is concern that mercury might be passing through the food chain — starting with fish — and being picked up by panthers. Mercury becomes concentrated farther up the food chain and panthers are a top predator.

"We can't say that is what caused her death," Oberheu said. But he added that because there are so few panthers, state and federal officials are hurriedly testing preserved remains of 10 other panthers from south Florida. Results are expected in three weeks.

"What happens to panthers could be a signal for what is happening to other creatures," Oberheu said.

Mercury also is being found in large-mouth bass in the Upper St. Johns River and other parts of Florida. On Tuesday the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services cautioned fishermen to limit consumption of bass from the Upper St. Johns, which includes Brevard County.

M E R C U R Y: "IN FLORIDA, MUNICIPAL INCINERATORS APPARENTLY ARE THE LARGEST SOURCE OF MERCURY POLLUTION, annually spewing an estimated 20,582 pounds of mercury vapor into the air. There are five such incinerators, operated by Dade, Hillsborough, Pinellas and Bay counties, plus the city of Tampa. All the plants have pollution control devices called 'electrostatic precipitators' that are designed to collect ash particles but have no effect on gases such as mercury vapor. The state does not routinely monitor those plants for mercury emissions. But a DER official said tests on one of three incinerators in the Pinellas unit indicated 0.31 of a pound of mercury was escaping into the air each hour of operation. That incinerator burned 1,000 tons of waste daily. Based on that rate, the Pinellas unit - which is burning a total of 2,427 tons of refuse daily - emits 6,598 pounds of mercury each year. Assuming similar hourly rates for the other facilities, taking into account the volumes of waste that each burns, these estimates of annual mercury pollution can be calculated: Dade County, 6,789 pounds; Hillsborough County, 2,987 pounds; Tampa, 2,715 pounds; and Bay County (Panama City), 1,493 pounds... Incinerator operators are not required to remove products containing mercury before burning them, but Buck Owen, assistant director of the DER's air resources division, said recent legislation will require the plants to recycle a percentage of products containing mercury. Owen also said five new incinerators being built will remove such items before burning and will have more sophisticated pollution-control devices, called 'dry scrubbers.' They may be more effective in limiting mercury emissions. Some tests estimate dry scrubbers can remove 70% of the mercury. But there are indications the devices may not be as effective as backers claim. 'A couple of facilities in California have dry scrubbers...and instead of collecting 70% of the mercury, the collection rate is dropping off to zero,' said Ray Morrison, mercury project officer in the EPA's Atlanta office." The Orlando Sentinel, June 25, 1989.

**M E R C U R Y: SEPARATION OF HAZARDOUS MATERIALS IS RECOMMENDED AFTER TESTS AT
DETROIT'S INCINERATOR FIND MERCURY EMISSIONS 400% HIGHER THAN PERMIT ALLOWS.** "As

reported in the Detroit Free Press on September 22, 1989, the Detroit Resource Recovery Authority failed to meet its mercury and hydrochloric acid emissions test as required under the Michigan DNR construction permit. The level of mercury found was 400% higher than allowed and hydrochloric acid gases were 30% higher. The facility continues to operate under its temporary construction permit [3,000 tpd] in what is called a 'test burn' phase...they have been 'test burning' since December 1988...the Madison Heights incinerator located in Oakland County ran for sixteen years without an operating license until they were finally shut down in 1988 after many years of citizen protest...Now the Wayne County Air Pollution Control Division head Al Greenberg is calling for the separation of all batteries, paints and hazardous materials from the waste stream. He states we cannot allow the incinerator to become a garbage dump in the sky..."

W.E.A.V.E. Newsletter (**Women Empowered Against Violence to the Environment**), October 1989/1. Address: P.O. Box 11215, Detroit, MI 48211.

"EPA PROPOSAL TO REGARD 'MATERIALS SEPARATION' AS BACT ALARMS INDUSTRY. Washington, D.C., waste-to-energy lobbyists are readying for an intensive fall campaign to scale back a provision of New Source Performance Standards [NSPS] that would consider 'materials separation' to be Best Available Control Technology [BACT]. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency proposal, which was recently drafted and forwarded to the Office of Management and Budget [OMB] for clearance, would 'wreak havoc' on the waste-to-energy industry, say these officials. The EPA draft, in regarding materials separation to be BACT under NSPS of the Clean Air Act, would effectively mandate that a 25% materials separation threshold be achieved, and continue to be met, for an incinerator to receive and keep its operating permit. While the November 30 deadline EPA faces is only for issuance of proposed NSPS regulations, under law those proposals will have the effect of being final rules, effective immediately, for all plants that have not begun construction. 'The EPA scheme is unworkable,' charges Charles Samuels, an attorney with Mintz, Levin, Cohn, Ferris, Glovsky, and Popeo. 'If adopted as proposed, it will either put a freeze on projects, or people will drive through the loopholes.' Samuels notes that though the intent of the provision is to promote recycling, 'the likely effect will be the opposite' as cities will be forced to landfill materials that have been separated to meet the NSPS standards. Industry officials maintain that EPA's attempt to impose a materials handling requirement under the regulatory framework of the Clean Air Act is 'a manipulation of the regulatory process. In addition, they fault the Agency's materials separation provision as being inconsistent with the well-publicized EPA decision last spring not to require recycling for the Spokane waste-to-energy project to receive its PSD permit. Although the EPA draft is now at OMB, the issue is far from being decided, say industry officials, who plan a lobbying blitz in the coming month to persuade the Agency of the terrible truth and consequences of its draft, if adopted. Industry officials are supportive of EPA's goal of 25% recycling, but will contend that greater emphasis must be first placed on infrastructure for this goal to have a reasonable chance of being achieved." Waste-To-Energy Report, October 18, 1989.

Waste Not # 75

*A publication of
Work On Waste USA,
a non-profit corporation dedicated to the
promotion of sound resource
management policy.*

Annual Subscription Rate: \$35

Students & Seniors: \$25

Consultants &

for-profit organizations: \$100.

*Canadian rates: \$US 40
Letters, articles and calls from the public
welcome.*

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

*Paul & Ellen Connett, Editors
82 Judson Street
Canton, New York 13617
(315)379-9200*

Printed on recycled paper, naturally