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OCT
2016



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Investigation

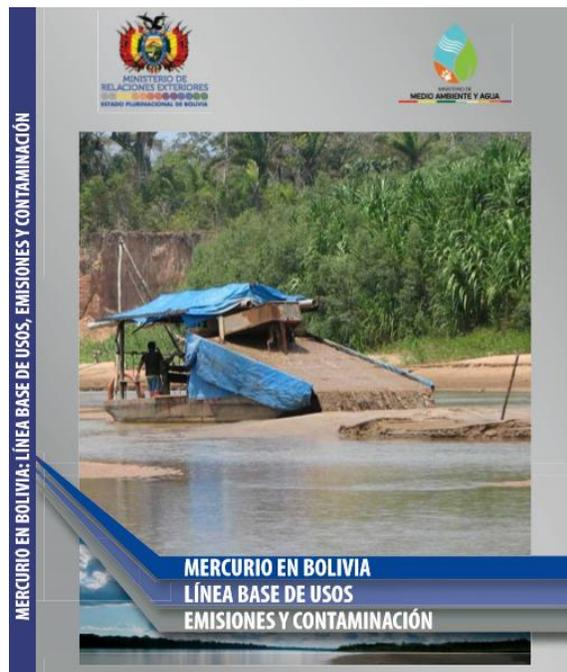
BOLIVIA SEEKS TO FURTHER KNOWLEDGE OF IMPACTS OF MERCURY

La Paz, Bolivia

Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Environment and Water, presented the research publication *Mercury in Bolivia: Baseline assessment of uses, emissions and pollution*.

The study systematizes the results of the mercury emissions and pollution research carried out in the country. This publication was achieved with the collaboration and support of WWF Bolivia and IRD (Institut de Recherche pour le Développement) from France and seeks to further knowledge on impacts from increase of mercury emissions.

While mercury is a heavy metal that occurs naturally and is widely spread in the Earth's crust, there is a significant increase of mercury emissions released to the atmosphere due to anthropogenic activities. This poses a major challenge to address impacts that have begun to gain greater importance in the international arena over the past decade.



Mercury is considered one of the ten most toxic metals for mankind; when released into the environment it travels thousands of miles before it is deposited back into the earth. When in soil, water and sediment, it is then modified, converting these natural elements in primary sources of pollution activated through erosion, deforestation, biomass burning, energy production, mining and industries.

The study reveals that in Bolivia average mercury emission or release from both primary and secondary sources per year is 133.1 t, which corresponds to about 7% of world average emissions in 2005. The mining sector contributes about 70% of this mercury pollution. The research shows that 78% of cosmetics and soaps, 17% of pharmaceutical equipment, 3% in cement companies, 2% in batteries, and 1% of bulbs and lamps that reach local markets in Bolivia contain mercury.

Mercury emissions dispersed through erosion and water flows reported estimated values between 7.7 to 20.3 tons per year, playing a critical role in the contamination of Bolivian lowlands. This deeply affects the Amazon and Pantanal wetlands, both priority sites for sustainable development and conservation of key biodiversity and unique species.

Mercury and its derivatives are highly toxic for both humans and ecosystems. To determine levels of exposure to mercury, variations regarding diverse environmental and socio-cultural factors were considered and data was collected from representative populations of the Amazon, Endoreic and the Plata basin.

The most significant results revealed that the consumption of fish from natural water sources is by far the most common cause of mercury poisoning. Exposure to mercury mainly affects riverbank settlements, especially indigenous communities where fishing is the primary source of nutrition. Among the most affected are the Esse Ejjas, nomadic people who base their livelihood security on fishing for income and food.

Furthermore, studies predict that the construction of dams in the Amazon region will change the concentration of mercury in water courses. The creation of reservoirs linked to the construction of dams can accelerate natural process of decomposition of organic matter that release mercury in its polluting form. This then is transferred to aquatic organisms through the food chain, affecting endemic and globally important species such as the pink river dolphin, which feeds on mercury-containing fish.



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With this baseline study, the government of Bolivia agrees to reduce and eliminate mercury emissions, emanating from human-based activities, to the atmosphere and the environment, and gradually reduce the use and disposal of products containing this toxic element, in accordance with the Minamata Convention, an internationally agreed framework signed by 140 countries.

The information generated will serve as basis for the development of a national agenda to promote the implementation of public policies, design regulations and define specific actions to ensure human well-being and help nature thrive.

Thus, Bolivia takes an important step towards building a harmonious relationship between people and Mother Earth.



Quick facts:

- Bolivia is the 2nd largest emitter of mercury from gold mining in Latin America
- 47% of mercury emissions in Bolivia come from gold mining
- The Amazon region is highly sensitive to mercury pollution
- Studies reveal that in Bolivia mercury concentration in fish exceeds recommended guidelines



Why we are here

To stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.

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