

Gov't considers 7 states for mercury site

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FILE - In this June 15, 2009 file photo, construction continues on a waste treatment plant at south-central Washington's Hanford nuclear reservation north of Richland, Wash. (AP Photo/Shannon Dininny, File)

(AP) -- The federal government is trying to find a location to store the nation's excess mercury deposits, with seven states being considered. But the government is quickly finding out that very few people want the stuff.

A Colorado woman who showed up at a public forum on the issue last week had this to say about the plan: "No, no, no, no, no. No mercury." The Idaho governor was equally emphatic in his opposition, saying "not gonna happen." The Kansas City Council already passed a resolution against the plan.

Even people in this city, where locals embrace the atomic legacy of the

neighboring Hanford nuclear reservation, are a little skittish.

"I don't like it," waitress Amanda Wyrick said as she poured a Half-Life Hefeweizen for a customer at Atomic Ale Brewpub and Eatery. "I would rather it not be close to me."

The United States still exports surplus elemental mercury, the purest form, often to developing countries with less restrictive environmental regulations. Then-U.S. Sen. Barack Obama sponsored a bill last year to bar mercury exports beginning in 2013, and President Bush signed it.

The bill also requires the Department of Energy to identify a safe, long-term storage site for up to 17,000 tons of mercury, which is so dense that it would fill less than half of an Olympic-size swimming pool. That includes stockpiles held by the federal government, as well as commercial supplies.

Officials are considering sites in seven states: Washington, Idaho, Nevada, Colorado, Texas, Missouri and South Carolina. Six already operate as federal defense or nuclear sites, but residents are swiftly voicing opposition because mercury is such a toxic substance.

Sometimes called "quicksilver," mercury is a dense, metallic element that occurs naturally in the environment and has been used in gold mining, manufacturing chlorine and caustic soda, batteries, thermometers and other uses. Its use has been in decline in this country since it was linked to health issues, including pulmonary and neural disorders.

In Colorado, the Energy Department is considering a site near Grand Junction where uranium tailings are stored. Residents fear mercury could contaminate tributaries that flow into the Colorado River, a water source for millions of people in the West.

Colorado Gov. Bill Ritter came out against the plan Thursday, saying he will convey his opposition about the proposal to the Department of Energy.

"Colorado's Western Slope is no place for the federal government to deposit thousands of tons of mercury. The risks to ground and surface water are too great. The risks to our air quality are too great. The risks of transporting elemental mercury over long distances and on routes that run adjacent to or cross major water sources, such as the Colorado River, are too great," Ritter said.

Nevada officials expressed "grave concerns" about storing the waste at the Hawthorne Army Depot, a 150,000-acre depot in a small, struggling desert town 130 miles south of Reno.

Allen Biaggi, director of the Nevada Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, said the state has already done its share for the federal government, as home to the Nevada Test Site, a test range, U.S. Naval and Air Force bases and the depot.

"It's time for another state to step up," he said.

The federal government wants to work cooperatively with states to find a safe site, said Frank Marcinowski, the Energy Department's deputy assistant secretary for regulatory compliance.

A draft environmental impact statement is expected to be released for public comment in the fall.

"We are ordered to come up with a site," Marcinowski said. "We see this as an opportunity to help reduce the export and transportation of mercury."

Officials in Texas, the only site where a private, commercial landfill expressed interest in storing the waste, have taken no position on the proposal. Waste Control Specialists, based in Dallas, already stores PCBs and radioactive waste at its landfill near Andrews in West Texas.

The company has permits to receive mercury at the site, as long as they don't exceed their capacity, said Andrea Morrow, spokeswoman for the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter told a radio station that mercury storage there is "not gonna happen" and expressed dismay that he hadn't been notified Idaho National Laboratory was even being considered. Officials in South Carolina say waste at the Savannah River site from the production of atomic weapons during World War II and the Cold War should be dealt with before more is added.

The Bannister Federal Complex near Kansas City is also being considered, but the Kansas City Council unanimously approved a resolution this month protesting the plan.

Some Hanford-area residents say mercury won't add much to the extensive contamination already at the site, which produced plutonium for the bomb that was dropped on Nagasaki, Japan in World War II. Others believe it's a bad idea.

Five years ago, Washington voters overwhelmingly approved an initiative that barred the federal government from bringing any more nuclear waste to Hanford until the existing waste is cleaned up. A federal appeals court ruled it was unconstitutional.

The voters' sentiment remains, even if the issue isn't black and white for Washington officials, said Jay Manning, director of the state Department of Ecology.

"We have plenty to clean up at Hanford and adding some new waste stream is something to be cautious of," Manning said, though he added that the state supports efforts to create a [mercury](#) repository. "But it's too early to categorically say, 'No.' We want to engage in discussion and we want a rigorous and thorough environmental evaluation."

Associated Press writers Steven K. Paulson in Grand Junction, Colo., and Martin Griffith in Reno, Nev. contributed to this report.

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