

Activists put pressure on MPCA to deal with mercury pollution

By [Stephanie Hemphill](#) | 09/23/14



MinnPost photo by Stephanie Hemphill

Robert Fox casting a line into the St. Louis River.

DULUTH — Activists in northeastern Minnesota are pushing the state to move faster to reduce mercury pollution in the St. Louis River. More than 100 people attended a citizen's forum Thursday night, many of them still smarting from the [Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's](#) sudden decision 18 months ago to drop out of a multigovernment mercury-reduction effort. At the time, the agency said a model the plan was using would not provide enough information to adequately analyze the complex river system.

At issue are unusually high levels of methyl mercury pollution in the St. Louis, the largest U.S. tributary to Lake Superior and hence a true headwaters of the entire Great Lakes system. Methyl mercury is a form of mercury that accumulates in aquatic life, becoming more and more concentrated as it moves up the food chain, ending in humans who eat fish. A [Minnesota Department of Health](#) study found that 10 percent of infants born in the Lake Superior region [have](#)

levels of mercury in their bodies that can cause brain damage and other health problems.

After dropping out of the mercury-reduction effort, the MPCA launched a study of the St. Louis and four other rivers in northern Minnesota that have high methyl mercury levels. The study aims to determine which of several factors is the most important in causing the problem. Sulfate is known to play a role; so are water levels and temperatures, wetlands and dissolved organic carbon. But so far the agency doesn't have enough money to do necessary sampling in the St. Louis River; the Legislature directed \$743,000 to sampling in the Roseau River instead. The MPCA says it can use what it learns on the Roseau to help it understand the St. Louis.

While the research could ultimately be useful in creating a pollution reduction plan, many people at the meeting saw it as more of a delay than a next step. And they blasted state agencies for allowing mining companies to operate and expand, presumably contributing more to the problem.

"We're told we don't have enough science to do the pollution reduction plan," said retired mineworker Bob Tammen during the citizen's forum. "I'm pretty sure that also means we don't have enough science to issue mining permits."

The MPCA's Shannon Lotthammer explained that the agency uses the scientific information it has to issue permits, and meanwhile conducts research to improve understanding of the complex systems.

Retired chemistry teacher Len Anderson said he thinks there's enough information to act; what's lacking is the political will. "We need the policymakers in St. Paul to face the multinational industries and their supporters on the Iron Range," he said.

The **Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa's** water quality specialist, Nancy Schuldt, said the entire St. Louis River watershed is different from others in Minnesota due to a variety of human-caused disturbances.

"Seventy-thousand acres of the headwaters (on the Iron Range) have been degraded. In the mid-section, a vast peat land has been drained. Further downstream, hydro-electric dams cause re-suspension of contaminated sediments," she said.

Schuldt says the tribe is concerned about expansion of mining, with several copper-nickel mines on the drawing board. "I'm not convinced permitting decisions take all the information we have into account; I'm not convinced current permits will protect the water."

Most of the mercury in Minnesota rides the wind from distant sources. Lotthammer says the state is on track to dramatically reduce mercury emissions from coal-burning power plants. Two-thirds of the mercury released in the Lake Superior basin **comes from taconite plants**, which release mercury that occurs naturally in the ore. The MPCA has just adopted a rule requiring the taconite

industry to report mercury emissions and to submit plans by 2018 for how they're going to reduce them.

The forum was organized by the [Minnesota Environmental Partnership](#) and several other groups. MEP northeast program coordinator Andrew Slade says the group plans to hold another forum a year from now to ask state and federal agencies to describe their progress.

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COMMENTS (1)

Mercury

SUBMITTED BY **TODD HINTZ** ON SEPTEMBER 23, 2014 - 2:09PM.

They're just NOW adopting rules to require mercury reporting? Why wasn't this done circa 1970? It's not like mercury poisoning is a new issue that just popped up last week.

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