

Mining left a legacy of mercury at Putah Creek

Olga Garzon, Woodland Daily Democrat, 9-6-10

Most of us know that mercury contamination is a concern with some seafood and freshwater fish, but how the mercury gets into those fish is less well understood. Some mercury in Putah Creek, the Delta, and the ocean actually comes from the mining legacy in Putah Creek.

This month's CreekSpeak will address mercury in the Putah Creek watershed. On Thursday, from 7 to 9 p.m. community members will gather at the Winters Library to hear from Dr. Stephen McCord, senior engineer with Larry Walker Associates, to discuss the role Putah Creek played in the California gold rush, the mercury remaining in Putah Creek, and what is being done about it today.

Putah Creek Council arranged this month's CreekSpeak and the follow-up Oct. 3 mercury mine tour to shed light on this important local resource issue.

"I think mercury contamination is one of those issues most of us non-scientists don't fully understand. We know it's bad for our health, but the issue seems so complex it's hard to know where to start, and who to ask. This month's CreekSpeak and next month's fundraising tour will give attendees a great understanding of mercury contamination and the movement of mercury through aquatic ecosystems," said Libby Earthman, executive director of Putah Creek Council.

Mercury is a natural element found in the Putah Creek watershed. From the Gold Rush era through World War II, mercury was mined from the watershed for use in gold mining and various consumer products. That mining legacy has left behind a scarred landscape and contaminated waterways that even today threaten the health of humans and wildlife.

Mercury exists in many forms, but methylmercury is the greatest concern for human health. Methylmercury is a potent neurotoxin, linked to developmental problems in fetuses and children, and to nervous system effects in adults.

Methylmercury is readily absorbed from water and food, and therefore concentrations multiply greater than a million times between water and top predators of aquatic food chains such as salmon and tuna.

CreekSpeak is a six-month series about the history, culture, and nature of our bio-region. All talks are free and open to the public. CreekSpeak is held from 7 to 9 p.m. on the second Thursday of the month at the Winters public library.