

# News

## Committee on Interior & Insular Affairs

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### **PAST BIRD KILLS HAVE GIVEN RISE TO IMPROVEMENTS IN USE OF CYANIDE TO PRODUCE GOLD**

**GAO Cautions That Threats To Drinking Water  
Remain In Less Arid Areas**

**WASHINGTON, D.C.** -- Over 9,000 reported cyanide-related wildlife deaths, mostly of migratory waterfowl, have occurred at cyanide leach mining operations in Nevada, California and Arizona between 1984 and 1989, the General Accounting Office said in a report released today by the Chairman of the Subcommittee on Mining and Natural Resources, U.S. Rep. Nick J. Rahall (D-WV).

"Although these deaths represent only a fraction of the bird deaths caused by hunting--less than 0.1 percent of the birds killed legally by hunters in the three states in 1 year--killing migratory birds without a license or a permit is a criminal offense under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Recently developed mitigation measures can prevent most cyanide-related bird deaths," the report states.

GAO noted that since 1986 when media reports called attention to large numbers of bird deaths at a cyanide operation in Nevada, federal and state oversight has increased. Last year, for example, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) implemented an agency-wide cyanide management policy. And in Nevada, the state now requires operators to establish protection measures at all cyanide ponds.

"The results of this investigation basically show that both the gold mining industry and the government have taken major steps to mitigate the potential threat the use of cyanide may pose to wildlife, surface and ground waters," Rahall said. "However, I think the report contains a clear warning that nobody better fall asleep at the switch because potential threats to water supplies remain in less arid areas."

Gold production in the United States has increased by over 900 percent since 1980, with cyanide used to extract over 80% of the 8.3 million ounces of gold produced domestically in 1989. Nevada accounts for about 60% of U.S. gold production with Arizona and California accounting for an additional 12%. The vast majority of this production comes from federal lands. The use of cyanide to produce gold typically involves the placement of low-grade ore in a large pile or heap. A diluted cyanide solution is then applied, and as the solution seeps through the heap it leaches the gold from the ore. The solution is then channeled to a pond and pumped to a processing plant where the gold is removed.

According to GAO, the U.S. is experiencing a new 'gold rush' made possible by the surge in gold prices during the 1970s and the use of cyanide extraction technology. As of January 1990, GAO said there were 119 active cyanide operations on federal lands in Nevada, Arizona and California.

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The principle findings in the report are that most cyanide-related wildlife deaths are preventable, past cyanide discharges appear to have had little environmental effect and that existing federal and state policies provide adequate authority to regulate cyanide operations on federal land.

In examining past inadvertent cyanide discharges into the environment, GAO said there was little adverse effect because they occurred in remote, arid areas with few of the discharges coming into contact with surface or ground waters and affecting drinking water supplies.

However, the report warns: "Nevertheless, the number of active cyanide operations on federal land has increased, and new operations have been established in other less arid states with ground water closer to the surface or with more surface water. GAO believes that these developments increase the risk that if cyanide discharges do occur, they could contact water supplies or endanger fish or wildlife." Among the less arid states where cyanide operations are spreading to are Montana, Idaho, Colorado, Oregon, Washington, and South Carolina.

GAO also said that techniques to prevent wildlife deaths have improved: "Initial efforts to protect birds focused on scaring them away from cyanide operations with hazing devices or techniques, such as propane cannons, pennants, floating alligators, decoy owls, music, and other recorded sounds. However, federal and state regulatory officials told us that hazing is an ineffective long-term solution."

One of the techniques of choice today, GAO found, is to restrict access to the cyanide solution by fencing the area where it is being used, and by covering the surface of cyanide ponds with nets. Another method is to dilute the cyanide solution to nonlethal levels.

While the GAO found these new techniques to be superior, the report notes that wildlife fatalities still continue at lower rates. At AMAX Gold Inc.'s Sleeper Mine near Winnemucca, Nevada, for example, prior to the company neutralizing its tailings ponds to prevent cyanide-related deaths, during the five months before starting the system it was experiencing 16 bird deaths per month. In the 16 months since dilution began, eight dead birds were found.

The report also found that there is adequate authority to protect wildlife and the environment from the potential hazards posed by the use of cyanide in mining operations, especially with the implementation of BLM's 1990 cyanide management policy. However, GAO recommends that the Forest Service adopt a similar policy.