SCCWRP #0004

Mercury in the environment: A Summary of Information Pertinent to The Distribution of Mercury in the Southern California Bight

David R. Young

[1]*Southern California Coastal Water Research Project, El Segundo, CA*

INTRODUCTION

The coastal waters of southern California now act as a major receptor for the wastes generated by anthropogenic activities. Everyday, approximately one billion gallons of sewage effluent enter the Southern California Bight, an open embayment of the Pacific Ocean, bounded on the north by Point Conception, on the west by the California Current, and extending southward to Cape Colnett, Baja California. Today, a major concern of the local residents is that these and other man-made wastes present a possible danger to public health and to the marine environment. In an attempt to assess the effect of some waste components on the marine environment, SCCWRP has produced this report on mercury in the Bight.

Mercury in the environment is a controversial topic. Unequivocal episodes of widespread mercury poisoning such as the Minamata Bay tragedy in Japan have created an international awareness of the potential dangers of mercury contamination. Here in southern California, residents are justifiably concerned over news media reports of mercury in marine life and of government seizures of fish having concentrations of mercury that exceed present federal guidelines. Yet there is no convincing evidence (e.g., statistics of mortality or morbidity) to indicate that mercury in the Bight poses a clear and present danger to public health.