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**[State board rejects plan to rid bay of mercury](#)**

**[Regional agency told to study municipal, industrial pollution](#)**

- [Erin Hallissy, Chronicle Staff Writer](#)

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The state water board rejected a proposal Wednesday to reduce mercury in San Francisco Bay, saying the plan did not adequately address how much municipal and industrial wastewater accounted for the pollution that has made fish unsafe to eat.



Environmentalists who had complained that the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board's mercury reduction plan was inadequate praised the state board's action.

"We want the approach taken to be really aggressive," said Sejal Choksi, the chapter director of San Francisco BayKeeper, who had opposed the regional proposal along with the Natural Resources Defense Council and Clean Water Action. "In the Bay Area, we always hear that we're at the cutting edge, and we have all these innovative new techniques, but in the Great Lakes there are (wastewater) facilities that are achieving better mercury extraction than here."

Burton Wolfe, executive director of the San Francisco regional water board, said the state's rejection would delay the long-term goal of reducing pollution, because it requires lengthy studies that may do little to reduce the overall amount of new mercury pollution being released into the bay.

"It slows the actual implementation of the mercury controls and directs us to do more study," Wolfe said. "In our mind, that's a waste of time and resources when we should be getting on to restoring the bay."

The bay's mercury pollution dates back to Gold Rush days, when miners used mercury to separate gold from ore and the element got into rivers that empty into the bay. Abandoned mines in the Sierra Nevada are still leaching mercury into rivers that flow into San Francisco Bay, where officials have warned for years that fish are contaminated.

Mercury also has ended up in the bay from such sources as dentist offices, where mercury amalgams are used for fillings.

Mercury can impair neurological development in fetuses and children and can cause tremors, memory loss and other problems in adults.

The San Francisco regional board's proposed plan called for requiring cities and counties to cut mercury releases by 40 percent over the next 20 years, but it said it would take 120 years for the bay's mercury levels to return to pre-Gold Rush days. Choksi and other critics

said that was too long.

Wolfe said he was uncertain how long it would take for the regional board to do the studies the state board ordered and said that the amount of mercury pollution from wastewater plants was minimal and that the proposed plan to reduce pollution should be implemented quickly.

"In our mind, the plan was quite aggressive," he said.

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