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Press Release

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State to test Nome miners for mercury exposure

Team to be in Nome for four days

ANCHORAGE — A team of health officials from the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services Section of Epidemiology will be in Nome Aug. 29 through Sept. 1, 2012, to conduct voluntary screening of gold miners for mercury exposure.

The screenings were prompted by numerous anecdotal accounts of miners recovering mercury and gold-mercury amalgams during their gold mining operations in Nome. The screenings are being done in consultation with the City of Nome.

“Some miners may be heating the gold to drive off the mercury,” said Ali Hamade, the section’s Environmental Public Health Program manager. “This activity may expose the miners to harmful levels of mercury fumes. We’d like to see how widespread the exposure has been.”

Volunteers will be asked to donate a urine sample. Inhaled mercury in the blood is purged rather quickly, but traces can remain in the urine for up to several weeks, Hamade said. The results will be compared to a national database.

The mercury is apparently derived from historical gold mining and purification operations that introduced and/or released mercury to the environment in Nome.

Screenings will be conducted at the Nome Public Health Center on Division Street, and at the West Beach tent city from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily.

Miners may receive results of the screening by supplying contact information to the team.

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