

The University of Nevada receives Super Fund grant

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The University of Nevada system has received a major program project grant under the direction of Dr. Ruth Billings, research associate professor at the University of Nevada School of Medicine. The grant, which is budgeted for \$3 million, is part of the Superfund Basic Research Program at the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS).

Dr. Kenneth Olden, director of NIEHS, announced that awards were given to 18 programs, involving more than 330 scientists at 29 institutions around the country. These institutions will study the human health effects of chemicals found in Superfund waste sites, and how to prevent or lessen those effects.

Dr. Billings is the principle investigator on Nevada's three-year project which involves Desert Research Institute, and the University of Nevada, Reno Mackay School of Mines, the Hydrogeology Program, and the College of Agriculture. The State Health Department also will be involved in the segment of the project that studies contaminants in the Carson River Basin.

According to Dr. Billings, the program, which consists of six projects, will focus on the most common chemical contaminants produced by mining of gold and silver in

the desert environment of the Western United States. She also has formed an advisory committee, with representatives from the mining industry, the Nevada Department of Wildlife and the Environmental Protection Agency to ensure that there is interaction between the state, the mining industry and the scientists.

Dr. Billings' project will study cyanide contamination, since this toxic chemical is the one most often used to extract low-grade ore. The other five will study mercury in the environment because, over the years, gold and silver were commonly extracted using a mercury amalgamation process that released large amounts of mercury into the environment. Because selenium is naturally present in this arid climate, the researchers also will study its interaction with mercury. All projects will evaluate the effects of these contaminants on humans and animals, with special emphasis on birds; migratory birds are adversely affected by both cyanide and mercury wastes.

These researchers hope that these atmospheric and geological studies will advance their basic understanding of how these contaminants are spread and how they can be cleaned up.

Nevada's Senator Harry Reid, a strong advocate of environmental health issues, encouraged the medical school to apply for the grant. "The Superfund has been an important part of our goal to improve environmental policy to ensure a clean and healthy environment for generations to come," Sen. Reid says. "I look forward to working with the School of Medicine on future efforts to improve Nevada's environment."