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UI scientist tries to take estrogens out of river

Patent to remove chemicals that cause defects in males

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Associated Press
 November 30, 2004

MOSCOW, Idaho – University of Idaho scientist Greg Moller is working on a patent to neutralize substances in municipal wastewater systems that may cause defects in males of many species — including humans.

The chemicals — known as endocrine disrupters — are finding their way into the environment via the bathroom toilet. They can exist in everything from birth control pills to detergents and antibiotic soap.

"We don't necessarily consider ourselves as polluters or having an impact on the environment every time we flush or every time we put something down the drain," said Moller, an environmental chemist and toxicologist.

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Moller says municipal wastewater treatment plants have an excellent history in protecting the public health, but "they really weren't designed for some of the chemical compounds that modern science — and specifically medical science — is now throwing at them."

Up to 90 percent of the estrogenic substances in birth control pills can pass through the body relatively

unchanged, Moller said. The triclosan antibiotic in many soaps is also an estrogenic substance.

Once released, the chemicals can cause sex changes in salmon and the production of hermaphrodite frogs and oysters. In more serious cases, it can lead to partially developed genitals in human males.

Moller said there's no danger that human and animal males will suddenly start morphing into females. But several studies appear to show a connection between estrogenic compounds and reproductive anomalies.

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Researchers from the U.S. Geological Survey recently linked triclosan in Nevada's Lake Mead with sex changes in fish.

In another study, University of Idaho fisheries biologist Jim Nagler found 84 percent of a sample of Columbia River salmon have genetic indicators that they changed from male to female before they were born.

Moller won't reveal specifics of his water treatment process in order to protect several pending patent applications. But he said it uses advanced oxidation techniques to chemically incinerate the compounds.

"It's similar to how a washing machine uses bleach to remove trace chemicals from dirty clothes," Moller says, although chlorine is not used in the process.

The water treatment technology created at the University of Idaho has been licensed to Coeur d'Alene-based Blue Water Technologies.

Along with the university, Blue Water has started construction on the Hayden Wastewater Research Facility at Hayden's wastewater treatment plant. It is due for completion in May.

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