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NOV 16 2009

BOISE, IDAHO

Selenium suspected in cattle deaths near Idaho mine

Environmental Quality Council

Eighteen cattle likely died of selenium poisoning near a southeastern Idaho phosphate mine, the latest livestock deaths in a region rich in phosphates where a legacy of pollution has killed horses and hundreds of sheep since the 1990s.

The cattle died around Aug. 5 near the defunct Lanes Creek Mine. Fertilizer-maker J.R. Simplot Co. controls the mineral rights here, but says it's never actively mined the site.

The dead cattle's livers showed high levels of selenium, a naturally occurring mineral unearthed with phosphate ore that contaminates groundwater and plants near mines if it's not properly contained. Their deaths come as J.R. Simplot and Monsanto Co., which makes Roundup herbicide from phosphate mined nearby, are seeking to dig new mines and public scrutiny is focused on the region.

"This is the first known incident of cattle loss to selenium in the phosphate patch, and true to form probably comes at a very inopportune time for Simplot," said Douglas Tanner, regional environmental manager at the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, in a letter obtained Friday by The Associated Press in a state public records request.

Tanner also raised concerns Simplot didn't adequately inform the public.

"Upon questioning would Simplot do a press release on the incident it was stated no, they would not," Tanner wrote Tuesday to DEQ Director Toni Hardesty.

From wire reports