

World Bank Article July 2013

In Kazakhstan: Eliminating Mercury and Controlling Floods

Nura River Clean-Up Project

The workers from Kazakhstan's Hydrometeorological Center (Kazhydromet) are looking for mercury in the waters of the Nura River near Temirtau, a city in the Northeastern Kazakhstan. This is a task they perform every ten days. "I've been monitoring here since 2004, and the level of contamination is three times less than it was," says Larissa Gimadeyeva, who works for Kazhydromet.

Larissa Gimadeyeva and her colleagues are working just below the Intumak dam. The dam was built almost on the site of a carbide factory that used mercury to make rubber. The factory's wastewater treatment plant wasn't designed to filter mercury and, as a result, more than 1500 tons of the toxin - over about fifty years - ran into the river, potentially polluting villages, farmland and UNESCO wetlands far downstream.

Now, with support from the World Bank, that's all been cleaned up. "The major idea here is that only clean water goes down the river to local villages," explains Magauya Kulzhanov, who is managing the Nura River Clean-Up Project. "The government's plan is to increase the irrigated lands downstream up to 20,000 hectares from 3,500 hectares now."

“ Things are better since three years ago when the river clean-up started. Before that the river flooded and some of the houses were ruined. ”



Nurlan Kurmetov
Project beneficiary

Life Downstream

In the village of Gagarinskoye (named after the astronaut Yuri Gagarin), farther downstream, lie fragile lands and farmers' fields, both of which will benefit from a controlled flow of clean water. Also the Korgalzhyn wetlands, which are home to

many endangered species and the nesting habitat of the pink flamingo, lie downstream of the Intumak dam.

The 6,000 or so inhabitants of five villages like Gagarinskoye appreciate the fact that the dam controls spring flooding, says Nurlan Kurmetov, who lives next to the Nura. “Things are better since three years ago when the river clean-up started. Before that the river flooded and some of the houses were ruined.”

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Bulytbay Meizamkhan
Project beneficiary

Ilya Sembi lives on the banks of the Nura with her husband and four grandchildren. She’s happy there are no more floods, he’s happy the river is cleaner. “Now it is good,” Ilya Sembi says. “When the heavy snow melts, it doesn’t reach the houses.” Her husband agrees. “The mercury was bad, but it’s cleaner now, everything is cleaner, and we are happy about that,” says Bulytbay Meizamkhan.

Not far from Gagarinskoye, a couple of local guys are spending the late afternoon fishing. They’re just downstream from a swamp that was cleared of mercury-laced soil a few years ago. Nowadays, the river even provides for a quiet afternoon and some dinner—dinner that is, now, safe to eat.