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Groups remind shoppers of waste from gold mining

By Anastasia Ustinova
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WASHINGTON - Two groups concerned about environmental contamination sought Wednesday to remind Valentine's Day jewelry shoppers that gold mining produces lots of waste, some of it hazardous.

"Don't tarnish your love with dirty gold," read the cards passed out to capital consumers by volunteers and staff from Earthworks/Mineral Policy Center and Oxfam America.

Their "No dirty gold" campaign will continue today in New York and Friday in Boston. The effort resembles an earlier successful campaign by Amnesty International to discourage Americans from buying black-market diamonds used to finance conflicts in Africa.

Earthworks/Mineral Policy Center, based in Washington, is a nonprofit organization that advocates clean mining practices. Oxfam America, based in Boston, battles hunger, poverty and social injustice.

"The values that we are putting into a gold ring are love, commitment and friendship," said Steve D'Esposito, the president of Earthworks/Mineral Policy Center. "We want to add a conservation value and human rights value."

The center's brochure says, "The production of one gold ring generates 20 tons of waste."

Luke Popovich, a spokesman for the National Mining Association, based in Washington, said that was misleading.

"Of the 20 tons processed, less than one-half of 1 percent can be considered waste," Popovich said. "Under current regulations, even this amount must be treated and all potential threats to the environment removed after processing."

That's in the United States. According to a report the two groups issued, most gold is mined in Third World countries where there is far less environmental protection.

Popovich said U.S. companies mining abroad followed the American practices voluntarily.

"Our shareholders expect certain environmental standards to be followed," Popovich said. "The idea that U.S. companies are exploiting Third World countries only because they don't have certain environmental standards is false."

Whatever the precautions, gold mining remains a dirty business, producing mountains of waste and millions of gallons of toxic cyanide and other hazardous pollutants.

Failure to contain them has caused serious environmental damage and some human casualties.

In 2000, for example, a dam at Baia Mare gold mine in Romania burst and spilled more than 100,000 tons of toxic wastewater, poisoning the drinking water of 2.5 million people. In Guyana in 1995, a gold-mine spill sent nearly a billion gallons of contaminated waste into the country's largest river, the Essequibo.

Cyanide, essential to separating gold from ore, can cause massive fish kills and health damage, the report says.

In 1998, both resulted from the spill of 3,884 pounds of granular sodium cyanide into a river en route to a gold mine in Kyrgyzstan. According to Popovich, the cyanide used in gold mining is heavily diluted by the time it's a waste, and doesn't present a danger to health.