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Toxic mercury from discarded thermostats continues to pollute Manufacturers' recycling programs found to be ineffective in most states

A manufacturer-run program for collecting mercury thermostats is failing to keep the toxic heavy metal out of the trash—and the environment—in most states, according to a new report released today by the Multi-state Mercury Products Campaign and the Product Stewardship Institute.

Turning up the Heat II estimates that, at most, the industry recycling program has captured 8% of mercury thermostats coming out of service in the past decade. This has resulted in the disposal of over 50 tons of mercury into the environment, which can expose people to the neurotoxin through fish consumption.

“For decades, companies like Honeywell profited from the sale of mercury thermostats but now are shirking their responsibilities when it comes to preventing pollution,” said Michael Bender, director of the Mercury Policy Project. “In state after state, manufacturers have pushed for collection programs that don’t work. It’s time to disregard their misinformation and do what’s right to protect public health.”

Mercury thermostats are a significant source of preventable mercury pollution. The Environmental Protection Agency has conservatively estimated that 2 to 3 million thermostats come out of service each year nationally, amounting to 7 to 10 tons of mercury annually. Each thermostat contains an average of 4 grams of mercury.

Turning up the Heat II used data from the annual report of the Thermostat Recycling Corporation (TRC), a voluntary program created by manufacturers, to estimate the thermostat collection rates per capita for each state in 2009 through 2011. Results showed that TRC collected only 5.8 to 8 percent of the mercury thermostats coming out of service from 2002 to 2011.

In addition, of the 10 states with laws requiring mercury thermostat collection, only two—Maine and Vermont—had programs that were significantly more effective than states with no program at all. After Vermont’s \$5 incentive went into effect, the state rose to first in the nation for collection 2011.

TRC routinely spins the data to highlight increases in thermostat collection while obscuring the fact that very few thermostats were still collected. For example:

- Georgia is ranked first, according to the TRC’s calculations, with a 3,522 percent improvement. However, the state still collected only an estimated 1,655 thermostats in 2011, leaving it near the bottom in terms of per capita collection rates.
- TRC describes the Texas program as a huge success story because it collected over 400% more in 2011 than 2009. However, the Texas program still collected less than 5,000 thermostats in 2011 compared to the Maine program, which collected 6,600 in the same year with a population 20 times smaller.

“Improper disposal of mercury-containing thermostats is an industry problem. Yet, rather than taking on the responsibility and being leaders, thermostat manufacturers have put too much of the burden on government—which is neither financially sustainable nor effective,” said Scott Cassel, chief executive officer of the Product Stewardship Institute.

The report is available at <http://mercurypolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/turninguptheheatii-final3.pdf>

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