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Toxic Mercury from Discarded Thermostats Continues to Pollute
Manufacturers' recycling programs found to be ineffective in most states

BOSTON, Mass.—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 (MMPC) and the Product Stewardship Institute (PSI).

Turning up the Heat II estimates that, at most, the industry recycling program has captured 8 percent 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, White-Rodgers and General Electric 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-containing thermostats are a significant source of preventable mercury pollution. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) 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

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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. The Maine and Vermont programs require that manufacturers pay \$5 to contractors and homeowners who return mercury-added thermostats, resulting in significantly higher collection rates. After Vermont's \$5 incentive went into effect, the state rose to first in the nation for collection 2011.

"It's clear that a financial incentive, coupled with good education and outreach, has resulted in Vermont having one of the highest per-capita thermostat collection rates in the country," said Bender.

"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. "Industry may say that they've already stepped up to the plate on the issue, but they haven't yet swung the bat. What they lack are strong performance goals for themselves, and strong financial incentives for contractors and homeowners."

Thermostat manufacturers routinely spin 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.
- In 2010, MMPC released the first edition of *Turning up the Heat*, which evaluated 2008 collection data and found dismal collection rates. *Turning Up the Heat II* shows that little improvement has been made in the three years since, resulting in tons of mercury pollution in the nation's water bodies.

In many states, legislation has been introduced in recent years that would require that thermostat manufacturers provide a financial incentive for the return of a thermostat. However, the outcomes have varied. In some states, such as Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Texas, manufacturers have countered by aggressively promoting bills that would do little more than require a continuation of the weak TRC program.

"The 'Trojan horse' strategy of promoting weak legislation that is known to be ineffective is irresponsible business practice on the part of thermostat manufacturers," said Elizabeth Saunders, Massachusetts director for Clean Water Action. "Mercury pollution is a serious public health threat and it's time that legislators, regulators and manufacturers turn up the heat on thermostat collection and get the job done."

Background

Over the last sixteen years, mercury use in U.S. thermostat manufacturing has reduced from between approximately 15 and 21 tons annually to less than 1 ton per year. This dramatic drop can be attributed, in large part, to the passage of legislation in 15 states banning the sale of new mercury thermostats. In the face of shrinking market availability for their mercury products, Honeywell announced in 2006 that it would end production of mercury thermostat switches, and the other large manufacturers have followed suit.

However, taking mercury thermostats off the market is only part of the solution. Tens of millions of mercury thermostats containing several hundred tons of mercury are still in use in U.S. homes and businesses. The mercury in a thermostat will pollute the air, land, or water if not managed properly at the end of its useful life. Given that thermostats can last for decades, the vast reservoir of mercury currently on walls in U.S. homes will be making its way into landfills and incinerators for years to come—unless effective collection programs are put in place.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that between 200,000 and 460,000 infants are born in the U.S. each year with mercury levels that are associated with the loss of IQ. This is due primarily to maternal consumption of mercury contaminated fish. Twenty-seven states have statewide advisories for all of their fresh water lakes and rivers, and 13 states have statewide advisories for all of their coastal waters, due to mercury pollution.

The report is available at <http://cleanwater.org/Turning-Up-The-Heat-Again>.

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About the Product Stewardship Institute (PSI)

The Product Stewardship Institute (PSI) is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to reducing the health and environmental impacts of consumer products. PSI brings together key stakeholders with conflicting interests to develop product end-of-life solutions in a collaborative manner, with a focus on having manufacturers assume primary financial and managerial responsibility. With a robust membership base of 47 state governments and over 200 local governments, as well as partnerships with more than 90 companies, organizations, universities, and non-U.S. governments, PSI advances both voluntary programs and legislation to promote industry-led product stewardship initiatives. For more information, visit PSI online at www.productstewardship.us. You can also follow PSI on Twitter at twitter.com/ProductSteward and on Facebook at facebook.com/ProductStewardship.

About the Multi-State Mercury Products Campaign (MMPC)

The Multi-State Mercury Products Campaign (MMPC) partners with over 20 state and national groups working to phase out mercury in products and divert products containing mercury from the waste stream through promotion of policies, regulations and extended producer responsibility programs enacted at the state level.