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Groups slam bill on mercury woes

By Matt Murphy and Michael Norton | STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE APRIL 02, 2013

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Critics of a state Senate-passed bill aimed at increasing the recycling of mercury thermostats plan to press the House to strengthen the legislation and to release a report Wednesday contrasting the proposal with mercury recycling programs in other states.

The report from Clean Water Action and the Product Stewardship Institute will evaluate thermostat collection programs in Massachusetts and nationwide. In an advisory issued on Monday to call attention to the forthcoming report, Clean Water Action described the Senate legislation approved last week as weak.

The environmental groups say millions of mercury thermostats remain in use in the United States and when the products are not recycled, mercury is released into the environment and waterways.

“We don’t think this is the way to get mercury pollution reduced,” said Elizabeth Saunders of Clean Water Action, about the Senate bill. “Based on what we’ve seen in other states, a program like this is not enough to do the job and there are more tools in the tool box needed.”

Maine and Vermont have the most effective programs, she said, with clear recycling goals and accountability measures that have produced strong recycling rates for mercury thermostats and light bulbs. The programs include a \$5 redemption program for homeowners and contractors who return mercury products to manufacturers for recycling.

“We think Massachusetts can do better. Unfortunately, lawmakers have not demonstrated that they want to do what works, and we think that’s unfortunate,” Saunders said.

Senator Marc Pacheco, Democrat of Taunton, said last week that the Senate bill moves the state’s thermostat sellers from a voluntary recycling program to a mandatory program.

He said manufacturers had agreed with the environmental lobby on the bill’s language and that the bill eliminates some industry-side liability.

“This is a good bill,” he said. “It will be good for the environment. It’s good for business.”



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The bill released from the Senate Ways and Means Committee last week is almost identical to one that passed the House and Senate last session, but failed to receive the final votes needed in both branches before the end of the session. Senators Jamie Eldridge and Sonia Chang-Diaz objected to its passage for not being strong enough.

The current 2006 law banning the sale of mercury thermostats and establishing a voluntary recycling program for light bulbs includes recycling benchmarks that manufacturers have failed to meet, argues Clean Water Action. Manufacturers are supposed to pay \$1 million a year for municipalities to support local recycling initiatives, but the state has not collected that funding.

Clean Water Action and other environmental groups want the Department of Environmental Protection to be given a stronger oversight role, arguing that current volunteer collection programs have been ineffective.

Saunders said her organization is backing a separate bill filed by Representative Ellen Story, Democrat of Amherst, and Senator Thomas McGee, Democrat of Lynn, that would include DEP oversight and clear, enforceable recycling goals for manufacturers.