

Mercury recycling is crucial

By Scott Cassel, Commentary
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Gov. Andrew Cuomo has a prime opportunity to keep thousands of pounds of a potent neurotoxin out of New York's food, air, and water. All it would take is the sweep of his pen on a game-changing bill.

The toxin: Mercury.

The source: Used mercury thermostats — that is, the round or rectangular temperature-setting dials often found on the walls of older homes and offices. The bill: A mandatory manufacturer-funded and -operated thermostat take-back program that would help keep the toxic heavy metal out of the environment.

Recently, the governor's office asked for "analysis, comments, and recommendations" concerning the bill. The governor will use these submissions to help inform his decision on the

bill. He should support the decision of the state Legislature and sign it into law.

The issue is complex. First, most people are unaware that many thermostats contain a lethal neurotoxin. So, when they replace them, they often just toss them in the trash.

When this happens, the thermostats' mercury-containing glass vials get crushed in garbage trucks or burned in waste combustors, and that has the potential to release the toxic heavy metal into the environment — including local waterways, where it can contaminate the fish that New Yorkers eat.

This kind of mercury contamination contributes to the issuance of U.S. fish consumption advisories. With New Yorkers discarding approximately 310,000 used mercury thermostats each year, more than one ton of mercury can end up in the local waste stream annually.

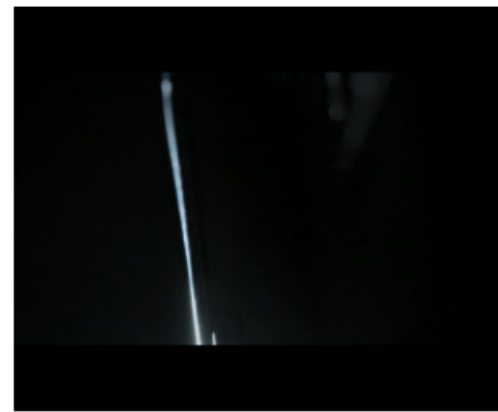
Second, in 1998, the thermostat industry's three biggest players — General Electric, Honeywell and White-Rogers — established its own voluntary mercury thermostat collection and recycling program. Unfortunately, after 10 consecutive years, and out of an estimated 70 to 100 tons of mercury available for collection in used thermostats, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, TRC collected just 5.8 tons. And in 2011, the program collected barely over 1 percent of all available thermostats in New York. That's hardly enough to make a sizable reduction in the amount of mercury contamination.

Last month, the state Legislature passed bill A8084, which makes manufacturers responsible for managing the safe collection and disposal of used thermostats. The bill requires that manufacturers finance and oversee a public outreach and education program, meet predetermined collection goals, and report on their performance annually.





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If manufacturers fail to meet their collection goals, the bill allows the state [Department of Environmental Conservation](#) to require that manufacturers offer cash incentives to consumers and contractors who drop off their used thermostats.

It is worth noting that Maine and Vermont, which have the nation's highest per-capita collection rates for mercury-containing thermostats, both have such laws in effect. Both both require that manufacturers pay financial incentives. Additionally, if manufacturers do not meet the pre-established collection goals, they are subject to a financial penalty.

There are many reasons why this bill is the right solution. A clear, consistent, and ubiquitous public education campaign would raise awareness and change consumer behavior.

Finally, money motivates. Cash incentives worked in Maine and Vermont. They can work in New York, too. The industry's voluntary approach to thermostat recycling is simply not working. A mandatory approach is now needed.

Cuomo has a great opportunity to protect New Yorkers and their environment from thermostat-related mercury exposure — by signing bill A8084 into law immediately. New Yorkers will be grateful for generations to come.

Scott Cassel is the chief executive officer of the [Product Stewardship Institute Inc.](#), a Boston-based nonprofit that promotes recycling.

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