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Advocates turn up heat

Group wants mercury recycling program to become state law
 By Brian Nearing
 Published 9:23 pm, Wednesday, April 3, 2013

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Laura Haight, with NYPIRG, addresses those gathered for a press conference at the Legislative Office Building on Wednesday, April 3, 2013 in Albany, NY. The press conference was held for NYPIRG to release a report documenting the failures of a manufacturer-led thermostat recycling program across the country. The report, Turning up the Heat II, was prepared by a coalition of national environmental groups. (Paul Buckowski / Times Union)



Albany

An industry-created voluntary system to recycle toxic mercury from old thermostats is allowing too many to get into the trash and pollute the environment, according to a coalition of environmental groups at the Capitol on Wednesday.

Sales of the thermostats containing mercury were phased out under state law starting in 2005, but millions remain in use.

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Hundreds of thousands of thermostats are discarded each year, most in unsafe ways, said [Laura Haight](#) of the [New York Public Interest Research Group](#). The solution is a state law requiring mandatory recycling, advocates said.

The coalition is renewing its efforts for a law after the state Assembly passed a thermostat recycling bill for the last three legislative sessions. A Senate version of the bill passed last year, but differences between the bills were never reconciled.

An old-style thermostat contains a seventh of an ounce of mercury — about 400 times more than an energy-efficient compact fluorescent light bulb. Mercury is a potent neurotoxin that can harm children and developing fetuses.

A decade of voluntary recycling has captured just 8 percent of mercury thermostats coming out of service across the country, according to a report released by NYPIRG, the [Multi-State Mercury Products Campaign](#) and the state [Product Stewardship Institute](#).

"Clearly, the industry's voluntary collection system is not working," said [Andrew Radin](#), chairman of the [New York Product Stewardship Council](#). "The solution: a mandatory collection law with financial incentives and performance standards for recovery of mercury thermostats, as well as enhanced public education and outreach requirements."

Most used thermostats are handled by contractors who removed them during building renovations. "We got about 150 thermostats here last year ... It used to be larger when the program first started, about 300-400 a year," said [Janet Buckmiller](#), branch manager at [Sid Harvey Industries](#), a heating, ventilation, air conditioning and refrigeration wholesale company in the village of Colonie.

Sid Harvey is one of 10 recycling centers located within 30 miles of the Capitol, according to the recycling corporation's website. Nine of the centers are for contractors, while one, at the Bethlehem town highway garage, is for homeowners.

Wednesday's report ranked New York 37th in nationwide thermostat recycling, at a rate of about 1 percent. In 2011, New York was estimated to have recycled about 3,400 thermostats (out of 300,000 estimated to have been removed), which was a fraction of the rate of leading states like Vermont and Maine, which have laws that require recycling goals and pay \$5 for each thermostat turned in. In Rhode Island, which adopted a recycling law in 2010, the rate jumped 400 percent the following year

The latest figure is less than the 3,700 thermostats reported recycled in New York in 2008, the last year that the corporation reported figures. Haight said the corporation stopped releasing complete state-by-state recycling data in 2010 because it reflected poorly on the program.

Absent tough recycling requirements, the majority of removed thermostats in New York likely end up as trash, Haight said. Some may be sent to one of the state's 10 refuse incinerators, which contain mercury in their emissions.

She called the voluntary program "an industry smokescreen" that was masking its ineffectiveness. When NYPIRG last studied the issue in 2010, New York ranked 30th in recycling. "We are slipping even further behind," she said.

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Collection programs

According to the industry group [Thermostat Recycling Corp.](#), the town of Bethlehem in Albany County, runs the only Capital Region program for households. No information on the program was immediately available from the town recycling office on Elm Avenue, which can be reached at 439-4955, Ext. 1598. The next closest voluntary programs for households were in Hancock and West Stockbridge, Mass. Information is available at <http://www.thermostat-recycle.org>.



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