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Mercury Thermostat Recycling Program Failing - Study

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Apr. 9, 2013

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A manufacturer-run mercury thermostat collection and recycling program is largely failing to keep the toxic material out of the waste stream, according a new study.

The report by the Boston-based Product Stewardship Institute (PSI) and the Multi-State Mercury Products Campaign (MMPC) states the industry recycling program has in the past decade captured no more than 8 percent of the mercury thermostats at the end of their use, according to a news release.

"Turning up the Heat II" drew data from the annual report of the Thermostat Recycling Corp., (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. The low recycling rate has resulted in more than 50 tons of mercury waste being disposed into the environment.

"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."

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has estimated that 2 million to 3 million thermostats reach the end of their use each year in the United States, amounting to 7 to 10 tons of mercury annually. Each thermostat contains an average of 4 grams of mercury.

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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, the groups said.

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