

Pass thermostat-recycling law to reduce mercury pollution.

Mercury thermostats are a major source of mercury in products.

- Thermostats still hanging in Maine buildings collectively contain some 5,600 pounds of mercury.ⁱ This is seven times the amount of mercury in all the auto switches left in cars manufactured before 2003 and eight times the mercury in thermometers still in use.ⁱⁱ
- In 2001, Maine passed a law to ban the sale and distribution of mercury-added thermostats (38 MRSA § 1661-C(5)) which went into effect January 1, 2006.
- Mercury is added to thermostats to make a “tilt switch,” typically a glass bulb containing inert gas and approximately three grams of mercury. One or more switches can be found in a thermostat.ⁱⁱⁱ Practical, economical alternatives to mercury thermostats are readily available.
- The mercury capsules in thermostats pose a threat to building occupants, particularly children, trash haulers, and firefighters, as well as Maine’s air, water, and wildlife.
- Mercury is a potent neurotoxin that attacks the brains of developing babies. When pregnant women or young children are exposed to methyl mercury it impairs childhood brain and nervous system development.^{iv} Mercury also is toxic to wildlife, and is linked to reproductive failure in species that consume fish, such as loons.^v

The current voluntary system for collection of thermostats is failing.

- In 2000, thermostat makers General Electric, Honeywell and White Rodgers established the Thermostat Recycling Corporation (TRC) that runs the recycling program in Maine.
- Under the TRC program, thermostat wholesalers volunteer to place bins where heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) contractors can drop off thermostats.
- Currently, less than 10 percent of the mercury contained in thermostats removed from buildings in Maine is turned in—180 of every 200 pounds is lost.

Contractors and homeowners need an incentive to turn in thermostats for recycling.

- 180 pounds of mercury is discarded, landfilled, or incinerated in Maine each year.
- Incentives are needed to ensure that mercury thermostats removed from buildings are turned in to a collection center to be safely recycled.
- Incentives work: In 2004, King County, Washington conducted a successful pilot thermostat bounty program, but unlike Maine’s proposed bill, Washington’s pilot program was funded by tax revenues.

The goal of the thermostat collection program should be to exceed 90 percent recovery.

The Maine Legislature should adopt LD 1792, which is modeled after Maine’s mercury auto switch law and requires thermostat manufacturers to pay a \$5 bounty for each thermostat turned in at a collection center.

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ⁱ Maine DEP, A Plan to Improve the Collection of Mercury Thermostats.

ⁱⁱ Maine DEP, A Strategy to Reduce the Mercury Content of Products: Report to Joint Natural Resources Committee 2003.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sass et al. 1994. Mercury Usage and Alternatives in the Electrical and Electronics Industries, EPA/600/R-94/047 pp. 24-25.

^{iv} National Research Council. 2000, Toxicological Effects of Methylmercury. National Academy Press, Washington DC.

^v MaineDEP, Mercury in Maine, Statewide Report. pp. 8-9 (2002)