



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

REGION 1

1 CONGRESS STREET, SUITE 1100
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02114-2023

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OFFICE OF THE CITY CLERK
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
OFFICE OF THE
REGIONAL ADMINISTRATOR

November 30, 2000

Dear City/Town Official:

This month, the city of Boston passed a law banning the sale of mercury fever thermometers in stores across the city. Widespread exposure to mercury is one of the most serious environmental health risks in New England and we applaud Boston for taking a leadership role in reducing the risk of mercury exposure and protecting the health of its citizens. The ban approved by the Boston City Council and signed by Mayor Thomas Menino will help significantly to reduce the amount of mercury that contaminates our environment.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, in conjunction with Health Care Without Harm, is encouraging towns and cities across New England -- including 351 in Massachusetts -- to follow suit by banning the sale of these thermometers, which contain mercury that can pollute our air and water, putting our youngest citizens at risk. Mercury damages the brain and kidneys and permanently harms unborn children. In New England, 83 percent of our rivers, lakes and streams are so polluted with mercury that we must limit our consumption of freshwater fish caught in them. Your community can do its part to reverse this damaging trend.

Although Boston passed the region's first city-wide ban on the sale of mercury fever thermometers, the entire state of New Hampshire already has a state-wide ban and many communities across the country are adopting similar legislation to prevent mercury pollution. The cities of Duluth, Minn.; DeForest and Stoughton, Wisc.; Ann Arbor, Mich.; and the counties of San Francisco, Calif.; and Dane, Wisc. already have mercury fever thermometer bans in place.

Health Care Without Harm, an international coalition of more than 290 health-related organizations, is launching a campaign to pass similar legislation in cities and towns throughout New England. I am writing to encourage you not to wait, but to take steps now to reduce children's exposure to mercury and to make a change that can have a significant impact on the environment.

Mercury is a toxic substance that can harm both humans and wildlife. When a mercury thermometer breaks in the home, it immediately begins to evaporate, potentially reaching dangerous levels in indoor air. In the year 2000, 17 tons of mercury from thermometers alone will be disposed as municipal waste and will end up in the food chain. Mercury makes its way into the food chain when it is deposited in lakes and fish eat it. Very small amounts of mercury can cause significant damage. One gram of mercury per year, the amount in a single thermometer, is enough to contaminate all the fish in a lake with surface area of 20 acres.

People who consume large amounts of mercury-contaminated fish are at risk of adverse effects on their nervous system. Mercury affects the brain and developing nervous system of children. The National Academy of Sciences estimates 60,000 children a year are at risk of brain damage or reduced mental abilities because of fetal mercury exposure, typically in contaminated fish eaten by pregnant women. All six New England states have advisories on the majority of their lakes and streams because of mercury contamination.

We know that many thermometers get broken in homes. In 1998, the American Poison Control Center received 18,000 calls regarding broken mercury thermometers. The average cost of handling each call was \$30, plus the added cost to the caller who was cleaning up the spill. Many other thermometers are broken, no doubt, by people who don't call into the poison control centers.

If a consumer fails to clean up mercury, it will eventually evaporate and could reach dangerous levels in indoor air. The risks increase if the consumer tries to clean up a mercury spill with a vacuum cleaner, or if the mercury is heated. The greatest danger of mercury exposure is in a small, poorly-ventilated room.

The six New England governors and premiers from all five Eastern Canada provinces, working with the EPA, adopted a Mercury Action Plan in 1998 that aims to cut mercury emissions in half by the year 2003 and eventually to eliminate mercury in the waste stream. Largely as a result of this agreement, all four New England states that have large waste incinerators -- New Hampshire, Maine, Connecticut and Massachusetts -- have passed legislation that is more stringent than what EPA requires. This legislation significantly lowers the amount of mercury emissions allowed by large municipal incinerators.

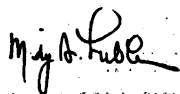
Nationally, the largest source of mercury emissions is from combustion of fuels, and most often coal. In New England, about half the emissions are from medical waste and municipal incinerators because of all the thermometers, light bulbs, blood pressure units and countless other products thrown away. EPA standards already in place will reduce national emissions from municipal incineration by as much as 90 percent by the year 2002, compared to 1995 levels.

EPA New England's efforts to reduce mercury emissions include a Partners for Change Mercury Challenge program, which is working with the region's hospitals to reduce mercury waste entirely by 2003. Thirteen New England hospitals, including nine in Massachusetts, have joined the program and eliminated 600 pounds of mercury from their waste streams. Information on mercury thermometers is available from the following web sites: <http://www.epa.gov/region01/topics/pollutants/mercury.html> or <http://www.epa.gov/glnpo/bnsdocs/hg/thermometers.html> or simply by going through the EPA website www.epa.gov.

Several types of non-mercury thermometers are on the market, including digital electronic thermometers, which are readily available at retailers. There are also digital basal thermometers for family planning that can be used instead of mercury basal thermometers. Recognizing the damage mercury fever thermometers can do to the environment, a number of retail stores have agreed to stop selling mercury, including Rite-Aid, Brooks, Walmart, Toys R Us, Target, Walgreens and CVS.

Please don't wait to take the same responsible action in your community. Act now in a way that can only help the people you serve and the environment you live in. If you want to take action in your town, you can call Jeri Weiss at the EPA in Boston at 918-1568 or Tiffany Skogstrom at Health Care Without Harm at 1-978-725-0929.

Thank you,



Mindy S. Lubber
Regional Administrator

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Consent Communication #2

A communication was received from the Mindy S. Lubber, Regional Administrator, United States Environmental Protection Agency, transmitting information on a law passed by the city of Boston banning the sale of mercury fever thermometers in stores.

In City Council December 18, 2000

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