
Recycling program begins for products containing mercury

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SPEARFISH

South Dakota residents can now participate in an EPA-backed program to reduce mercury pollution by safely recycling mercury-containing thermostats and fluorescent light bulbs at participating Ace Hardware stores across the state.

In Spearfish, Ace Hardware at 535 North Main St., and Knecht Home Center, 310 26th St., are among the first stores in the United States to participate in the pilot program that runs through December. Additional outlets are located throughout in Rapid City, Hot Springs, Montana and Utah.

Consumers can recycle compact fluorescent lamps and mercury-containing thermostats at select stores as part of a project coordinated by the Product Stewardship Institute, Women's Voices for the Earth, and Ace Hardware, with the support of the South Dakota Department of Environment and Natural Resources. This take-back, pilot project, funded in South Dakota by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Black Hills Power is expected to help greatly reduce the mercury pollution these products can create, according to a news release.

"The goal of this program is to provide consumers with a way to safely recycle these mercury products at easily accessible retail outlets," said Scott Cassel, Product Stewardship Institute executive director. "Ace Hardware has taken a leadership position on this issue and will provide residents with a simple way to recycle used CFLs, fluorescent tubes, and mercury-containing thermostats."

Fluorescent lamps and thermostats both contain mercury, a naturally occurring toxin that can affect the nervous system. Although no mercury is released when these products are in use or intact, when disposed of in the trash, crushed, incinerated, or otherwise broken, they can cause mercury to be released into the environment.

By using participating Ace Hardware locations, these products can be collected rather than ending up in landfills and dumps where toxins can be released. After collection, all the products will be shipped to Veolia Environmental Services and the Thermostat Recycling Corporation, where the mercury is removed and other materials recycled.

More than 250 million CFLs were sold in the United States in 2007. It is estimated that only 2 percent were recycled. While sales of mercury-containing thermostats, which contain a larger amount of mercury, are on the decline as manufacturers have shifted production to non-mercury digital thermostats, there are still an estimated 50 million mercury-containing thermostats in homes throughout the United States. Until now, safe disposal options for many consumers have been limited or nearly non-existent.

The Product Stewardship Institute (PSI) is a national environmental institute with membership from 44 states, 51 local governments, and more than 20 businesses, environmental groups, and organizations that establishes cooperative agreements to reduce the health and environmental impacts from consumer products.