

Mercury Recovery Program Rolls Out in 50 States

By Ted Sylvester

Representatives of the auto, steel and auto recycling industry, states, environmental groups and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, recently gathered to mark the one-year anniversary of a unique collaborative effort to reduce mercury pollution released when vehicles are dismantled and melted for steel recycling.

The August 16 roundtable meeting of members of the National Vehicle Mercury Switch Recovery Program (NVMSRP) was held at the Ann Arbor offices of the EPA and featured progress reports and presentations about future goals of the three-year program.

Mercury is a dangerous neurotoxin that at even low levels can impair infant and child development and may harm cardiovascular and immune systems of adults. Mercury pollution threatens wildlife and builds up in game fish that people consume.

Since August 2006, more than 635,000 mercury switches have been collected by the NVMSRP from approximately 5,900 participants. Mercury switches operate hood and trunk convenience lights in vehicles made before 2004, when they were reportedly phased out by domestic automakers. In its first year, the mercury switch removal program was rolled out to become operational in all 50 states, and prevented almost 1,400 pounds of mercury from being released into the environment.

The program works like this: Participating automobile dismantlers and shredders remove mercury-containing switches from whole end-of-life vehicles, put them in NVMSRP-supplied containers, and then ship them pre-paid to an EPA warehouse near Detroit's Metro Airport, where the mercury pellet is removed and sent on to a mercury recycler. Participants are paid \$1 per switch out of a \$4 million fund created by the auto and steel industry.

"It's a reasonable start," says Jeff Gearhart, Auto Project Campaign Director for the Ecology Center, "but we still have a long way to go." Gearhart calculates that there is approximately 90 tons of mercury contained in auto switches currently on the road in the U.S., with an estimated 4.5 million switches set to be retired in 2007. The official goal of the program is to recover 4 million switches in the first three years, but NVMSRP identifies the potential to recover 80 to 90 percent of the available mercury switches in the long term.

The NVMSRP, an extraordinary alliance and partnership between industry, federal and state govern-

to pay for switch collection and incentives for auto dismantlers. By 2006, nine other states had passed mercury switch legislation similar to the Maine law and at least ten other states had voluntary programs. A Memorandum of Understanding (www.epa.gov/mercury/pdfs/switchMOU.pdf) signed by nine organizations in August 2006 set up the NVMSRP and established the End-of-Life Vehicle Solutions Corporation (ELVS), created by the automotive industry, with the lead responsibility of funding and managing the nationwide program.

The PMFV and its offspring, the NVMSRP, the Lead-Free Wheels



PROGRAM PARTNERS: American Iron and Steel Institute, Steel Manufacturers Association, Automotive Recyclers Association, Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries, End of Life Vehicle Solutions Corporation, Environmental Defense, Ecology Center, Environmental Council of the States, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

ment agencies, and two environmental organizations, traces its roots to the Partnership for Mercury-Free Vehicles (PMFV), formed in 2001 by the Ecology Center and Environmental Defense to promote automaker responsibility in establishing a national auto switch recovery program. At the time, Ecology Center and Environmental Defense studies identified auto mercury switches as the nation's largest manufacturing source of mercury and the fourth largest source of mercury pollution overall.

In 2002, Maine passed the nation's first comprehensive law, which PMFV helped develop, requiring automakers

campaign (www.leadfreewheels.org), as well as the recent launch of the www.HealthyCar.org website (a consumer's guide to toxic chemicals in car interiors and children's car seats), are part of ongoing efforts by the Ecology Center to make consumers more aware of toxic substances in their vehicles, and in turn, encourage automakers to provide products made with safer alternatives. For more information about the NVMSRP and other auto-related Ecology Center campaigns and programs, visit www.cleancarcampaign.org.

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