

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

What's in a Million? Less Mercury

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(Washington, D.C. - Feb. 29, 2008) A national program that has cut more than one ton of mercury has reached a major milestone: 1 million switches have been removed from scrapped vehicles. The millionth mercury switch was removed through the National Vehicle Mercury Switch Recovery Program, a collaboration among EPA, automobile manufacturers, steel makers, scrap recyclers, automotive recyclers, states and environmental groups.

"By pulling mercury switches before they enter the recycling system, we are improving the health of our environment and the health of generations of U.S. residents," said EPA Administrator Stephen L. Johnson. "The one millionth switch may be just another drop in a bucket, but it's a big step toward erasing the environmental impacts of mercury air emissions in America."

Before model year 2003, some vehicles contained mercury switches for convenience lighting in hoods, trunks, and some anti-lock breaking systems. The program provides dismantlers with information, materials, support and incentives to remove these switches from end-of-life vehicles before they are crushed and sent to furnaces that recycle the steel. The goal of the program is to capture 80 to 90 percent of available vehicle mercury switches by 2017 when most pre-2003 vehicles are expected to be off the road and the program is scheduled to end.

Vehicles are the most recycled consumer goods in America. Each year, the steel industry recycles more than 14 million tons of steel from old vehicles. Most vehicles that have reached the end of their useful life are dismantled, stripped, flattened, shredded and melted to make new steel. If mercury switches are not removed from retired vehicles, a significant amount of that mercury can be released into the environment as air emissions. These air emissions are considered a primary source of mercury that poses a risk to human health and the environment.

Mercury automotive switch removal is an easy, cost effective and energy efficient way to reduce emissions. Dismantlers can find and remove most switches in a few minutes. Doing so costs far less per pound of mercury than emission controls, and supports many industries that produce and use scrap metal. Removal also conserves energy and natural resources by promoting automotive steel recycling while reducing mercury contamination.

Information on the mercury switch program and directions on how to join:
<http://www.epa.gov/mercury/switch.htm> or <http://www.elvsolutions.org/>

For photos of this event, go to: <http://www.epa.gov/multimedia>