

## Reuse, New York!

In the wake of Sept. 11, INFORM is redoubling its efforts to reduce both the 11,000 tons of waste generated each day by NYC residents and institutions and the spiraling costs of disposal — now at about \$300 million a year — since the Fresh Kills landfill closed and the city began exporting all its waste. An essential target is computers, which are expensive to manage because of their weight. In addition, they contain many toxic substances, such as mercury, lead, and polybrominated flame retardants, which create health and environmental risks when computers are incinerated, landfilled, or melted down for recycling.

Working with Per Scholas, a Bronx non-profit that refurbishes used computers and then sells them at a discount to low-income families and institutions, INFORM aims to increase computer reuse by city businesses. “Besides diverting computers away from the waste stream, increased participation in this program can help the city’s economy, since Per Scholas trains people as technicians and places them in career-track jobs,” explains Eric Most, director of INFORM’s Solid Waste Program.

At a reception to be held this spring, INFORM and Per Scholas will introduce New York region corporate leaders to the benefits of participating in the reuse program. We are also planning waste prevention events that will give residents the opportunity to drop off their used computers at points around the city. We hope to work with Per Scholas to collect the computers and eventually involve schools and government agencies in the program. ❖

## Mercury-Free and More: INFORM’s Purchasing Initiative Gets Results

Every day, across the counters of retail stores and business supply centers, flows a stream of products that are putting the health of millions of Americans at risk. These products contain lead, mercury, and dozens of other toxic substances whose particular danger lies in the fact that they do not break down — they persist in the environment and accumulate in the tissues of living organisms. Known as persistent, bioaccumulative toxins, or PBTs, these chemicals have been linked to cancer, nerve damage, reproductive disorders, and many other debilitating health effects. Children are particularly susceptible because they weigh less than adults and their immune systems are less developed. For example, research indicates that exposure to certain PBTs at critical points in a child’s development can cause severe reproductive problems that do not manifest themselves until adulthood.

PBTs enter the environment in emissions from industrial facilities but much larger amounts are found in consumer products, which have been subject to far less regulation. For the past two years, INFORM has been directing a project that encourages government agencies to phase out their purchase of these products, which release PBTs when flushed down the drain, incinerated, buried in landfills, or even recycled. In 12 states from Massachusetts to California, our recommendations have resulted in government purchasers choosing environmentally preferable alternatives to PBT-containing products such as office supplies, construction materials, and medical equipment.

INFORM’s Purchasing for Pollution Prevention project focuses on products because PBTs are present in hundreds of widely used consumer goods. It aims to alter government purchasing practices because federal agencies, states, and localities buy huge quantities of a great variety of these items. And since many companies design their goods to meet government specifications, establishing PBT-free purchasing requirements rewards businesses whose products contain little or none of these toxic substances. “With this initiative, we’re demonstrating that PBT-free purchasing can significantly reduce the amount of these dangerous chemicals entering the environment,” says Alicia Culver, director of the project.



The Mad Hatter in *Alice in Wonderland* alludes to the reputed effects of mercury, which was used in the 19th century hat-making industry. In fact, exposure to high levels of mercury vapor can result in nervous system damage, including tremors and mood and personality alterations. Promoting alternatives to products that traditionally contain mercury is a principal goal of INFORM’s Purchasing for Pollution Prevention project.

# Letter from the President

## So Many Products...So Many Toxic Chemicals



**A** fundamental question arises from this issue's lead story, "Mercury-free and More." Why, after more than 20 years of regulating toxic substances in this country, is

mercury still present in products used in millions of homes and workplaces — in fluorescent lamps, car parts, computers, and medical equipment? And, as INFORM documented in *Toxics Watch 1995*, mercury is only one of more than 70,000 toxic chemicals flowing into commerce at the stunning rate of 6 trillion pounds (or more) a year. The health impacts of most of these chemicals have not been tested adequately, especially in children, but the effects of some are now quite clear. Phthalates, the plastic softeners used in children's toys and hospital blood bags, can disrupt the reproductive system; brominated flame retardants contained in computers have been associated with cancer and problems of the immune, lymphatic, endocrine, and digestive systems; arsenic, used in wood preservatives, is a known human carcinogen. If these materials threaten the health of our children and our environment, why are they still in widespread use?

The answer lies in the fact that the federal government is virtually incapable of removing toxic chemicals from commerce. This fact surfaced in the research for *Toxics Watch*, which indicated that the process under the 1976 Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA) for evaluating chemicals already present in products was a total failure. Barely a handful of chemicals had been removed in 20 years, mainly because the EPA was rarely able to provide the requisite burden of proof that a chemical under review posed an "unreasonable risk" to society. Even for asbestos, a known carcinogen, the TSCA chemical review process dragged on for 14 years, and no major changes in the process have ever been made.

Another reason why so many toxic chemicals remain in commerce is that government's focus has been on industrial wastes rather than products. In 2000, however, INFORM's research documented that wastes are only a fraction of the problem. In New Jersey and Massachusetts, for instance, we found that 95 percent of the persistent, bioaccumulative toxins (PBTs) leaving industrial facilities leave in products destined for consumer and commercial use — in batteries, diesel fuel, restroom deodorizers, and art supplies — not in releases to the air or water or in shipments off-site for disposal. Contrary to earlier assumptions that

toxic chemicals in products are not a danger, it is now clear that many of these substances — especially PBTs, which persist in the environment and accumulate up the food chain — can leach from products into the air and groundwater after being disposed of in landfills, burned in incinerators or smelters, and even during use.


Over the past 20 years, as the damage caused by particular chemicals in products has become widely recognized and public outcry has mounted, some regulation has been achieved, including bans on DDT and restrictions on the use of lead in paint and gasoline. But with no strong federal capability to address the problem of toxic chemicals preventively, we are seeing a patchwork of efforts by government agencies and grassroots and environmental groups.

At INFORM, we are working for systemic change in toxic chemical use through our Purchasing for Pollution Prevention project, using the power of government purchasing to shift the market away from products that contain mercury and other highly toxic chemicals to nontoxic or less toxic alternatives. In the past two years alone, government agencies in 12 states have signed on to work with us, and many health and environmental groups are picking up our research and extending its reach. The response to our project is making it clear that given a choice, buyers will readily embrace safe, high-performance product options. And so, despite the federal government's frustrating record, we are optimistic that a growing number of manufacturers will devote increasing scientific and technical expertise to developing products that can meet our needs while helping to ensure a healthy future.

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# Mercury-Free and More (continued from page 1)

## Mercury-Free in Massachusetts

Massachusetts has adopted a “zero mercury” strategy that aims to virtually eliminate the use and release of this extremely toxic chemical; until recently, however, thermometers, blood-pressure cuffs, and other equipment containing mercury were still being sold to some public hospitals and clinics through the state’s primary medical supplies contract. That changed after INFORM helped the state’s hospital and laboratory purchasing team to evaluate mercury-free substitutes and develop bid specifications that promote their use. As a result, Massachusetts has now eliminated nearly all mercury-containing devices from this contract.

So far, INFORM estimates that the purchase of mercury by state medical facilities has been reduced by at least 5 pounds, enough to contaminate over 3 million striped bass or 3000 lakes. “The initiative has been so successful,” says Lara Sutherland, INFORM outreach coordinator for Massachusetts and Connecticut, “that we’re now reviewing the state’s contract for building supplies, with the goal of developing mercury-free specifications for products such as gas stoves, thermostats, and pressure gauges.”

## Flushing Out PBTs in NY

PBTs have been targeted by both the Canadian and US environmental agencies as a significant threat to the Great Lakes basin ecosystem. One such chemical is para-dichlorobenzene (“para”), which has been detected in trout caught in the Great Lakes and in 13 percent of drinking water samples taken from US surface waters. A possible carcinogen, para is a constituent of the deodorizing blocks commonly installed in toilets and urinals.

In Erie County, New York, INFORM assisted in a project to reduce the use of this PBT by identifying and evaluating less toxic alternatives. As a result, the county’s janitorial contract was rebid last fall and now offers only non-para



Traditional blood-pressure cuffs (left) contain mercury, but mercury-free aneroid units are accurate, available, and widely used.

products. “Although the PBT-free blocks cost about \$10 more per dozen,” says INFORM Great Lakes Regional Representative Kelly Luck, “workers report that they actually last three times longer than the old product, in addition to being safer.” Based on purchases from the previous year, Erie County estimates it has prevented approximately one ton of para-containing products from entering the environment.

## Vehicle Switch in Minnesota

Also in the Great Lakes region, INFORM collaborated with the Minnesota Office of Environmental Assistance and the state’s central purchasing office to incorporate mercury-free specifications into the state’s 2002 vehicle bid. (Mercury in vehicles is primarily used in antilock braking systems and light switches for the hood and trunk; it is also increasingly used in headlights.) As a result of this effort, all vehicles purchased on the state contract will be mercury-free within three years. “An overall mercury reduction policy was already in place in Minnesota,” Luck explains. “The new specifications

support that policy by sending a clear message to automakers to design vehicles without mercury.”

In response to Minnesota’s new mercury-free car bid (and other efforts by the National Clean Car Campaign), General Motors recently informed the state that it plans to end its use of mercury light switches immediately, nearly a year ahead of schedule.

## Greener Garden State

In New Jersey, INFORM contributed to a report from the Mercury Task Force calling for the “virtual elimination” of mercury throughout the state. “In a

state where every major water body is contaminated with mercury, the task force found that consumer products account for nearly 80 percent of the mercury released to the environment,” says Alicia Culver. INFORM helped focus the task force on preventing additional mercury pollution by restricting the sale and government purchase of mercury-containing products.

In the coming year, INFORM will expand the scope of the Purchasing for Pollution Prevention project by helping partners in California, Illinois, and other states implement PBT-free purchasing policies, and by conducting outreach to businesses in New Jersey and to the single largest purchaser in the nation, the federal government. ❖

For more information on government agencies that have used these safer substitutes and the contract language needed to order them, see INFORM’s PBT-free purchasing webpage at <http://www.informinc.org/PBT.htm>.

For more information on the Purchasing for Pollution Prevention project, or to become a PBT-free Purchasing Partner, contact Alicia Culver at 212-361-2400, ext. 234, or e-mail [culver@informinc.org](mailto:culver@informinc.org).

California Dept. of Health Services

# Eric Most

## Director, Solid Waste Prevention Program

**E**ric Most came to INFORM in October 2001 after five years practicing environmental law, most recently at Proskauer Rose LLP, where he counseled clients regarding compliance with hazardous waste disposal and environmental reporting requirements under federal



Emily Robbins

law. He is a member of the special committee on solid waste of the American Bar Association and serves on the membership and solid waste committees of the New York State Bar Association's environmental law section. Most attended George Washington University Law School in Washington, DC, and graduated *magna cum laude* in environmental studies and government from Colby College in Maine.

### When did you first become interested in environmental issues?

In high school, a friend's letter to Senator Pat Moynihan about air pollution made me think about the impact that individuals can have on environmental policy. I helped start our school's first environmentalist club and a school-wide recycling program that exists to this day. Then, during a semester in Australia, the rain forests and coral reefs brought to life what I'd been studying in college about how human activities affect these fragile ecosystems.

### How did environmental law become your focus?

I read an article about environmental law in high school that inspired me to prepare for a law career while still in college. At Colby, I went beyond the traditional environmental focus on ecology and chemistry to create my own major, which allowed me to study the relation-

ships among the environment, government, and economics. After graduation I got involved in creating a plan for sustainable development at the Maine State Planning Office, and internships at the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Wildlife Federation during law school helped me decide that I wanted to do policy work.

### What brought you to INFORM?

I was happy practicing environmental law, but I'm really more interested in public policy. I knew I would have a chance at INFORM to make a real difference, because its research is so influential. I truly believe that environmental awareness and economic development can go hand in hand, as long as there's a focus on the long term, and this is something INFORM has been demonstrating for years in its research and outreach.

### What projects are you focusing on right now?

It's an especially exciting time, because we're taking the first steps in implementing a groundbreaking waste prevention program in New York City, which we helped design and were then chosen by the city to run. Right now, we're contacting nonprofit groups that might be interested in designing and carrying out waste prevention initiatives tailored to their specific communities — everything from programs that encourage backyard composting in neighborhoods with mostly single-family homes to collaborations with local businesses to take back clothes hangers or packaging "peanuts" for reuse or recycling. We're also working with Per Scholas, an organization that refurbishes used computers and then sells them to low-income individuals and schools, to increase computer reuse citywide. This is a great way to prevent computers and their toxic components from ending up in landfills, and we hope to get our corporate associates and other businesses to participate. ♦

## INFORM PUBLICATIONS

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# INFORMing Others

INFORM's recent activities and findings

## Working Toward Sustainable Products

### Producer Responsibility: Voluntary or Mandated?

Senior Fellow Bette Fishbein spoke this winter at an invitation-only seminar at the Paris headquarters of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Over 60 experts from 16 countries gathered to assess the effectiveness of "extended producer responsibility" (EPR) programs under way around the world. EPR is the policy that makes manufacturers responsible for managing their products after consumers discard them. The seminar was a follow-up to previous meetings that ultimately produced a guidance manual for governments wishing to implement EPR, to which Fishbein contributed important elements.

In her talk, Fishbein contributed her intimate knowledge of the US experience with EPR to the issue of voluntary versus mandated programs. "Voluntary programs work well when they're profitable, and not so well when they incur added costs," she said. For example, Xerox's program is highly profitable because the company redesigned its products to enhance recovery at end of life and implemented manufacturing systems to

take advantage of the recovered items. In contrast, the national program managed by the Rechargeable Battery Recycling Corp. (RBRC) has weaknesses typical of voluntary programs that entail a net cost to producers. "RBRC has not reported on its recycling rates since 1998, but indications are that they are far less than projected," Fishbein said. "And because this is a voluntary program, there are no consequences for the shortfall."

INFORM's research on EPR indicates that collection and recycling targets, as well as reporting requirements and enforcement mechanisms, are essential to giving manufacturers an incentive to design products that are less wasteful and more recyclable. Fishbein observes: "Such products are EPR's real goal, because they reduce environmental impacts not just from waste but over the entire product life cycle, from raw materials extraction to manufacturing to end of life."

## Working for Clean Transportation

### Vehicles for Security and Health

At a panel discussion earlier this year, INFORM President Joanna Underwood laid out the compelling reasons why a shift to alternative vehicle fuels, and away from fuels based on oil, is imperative for New York and the nation. Sponsored by the United Nations Association of New York and the Citizens Network for Sustainable Development, the meeting focused on ways New Yorkers can support the UN's work on energy and climate change issues.

Observing that the 217 million cars, buses, and trucks that travel US roads are the main reason for our steadily growing reliance on foreign oil, Underwood noted that much of this oil is purchased from repressive and unstable regimes in the Persian Gulf region. "New York State is especially dependent," she said, "sending \$3 million abroad for oil each day, which is bleeding the economy and rendering our city and state exceptionally vulnerable to price hikes and supply disruptions." The health threat from vehicle emissions is also severe in the state, with asthma rates among New York City children the highest in the country.

"New York has already taken some important first steps to reverse this trend," Underwood said, "but we need to do more to create a healthier and more energy-secure city." Among the most promising options are the shift to natural gas fuel of NYC Transit's fleet of 4200 buses — the largest in the nation — as well as heavy-duty diesel-burning garbage and delivery trucks. "Transforming our vehicle sector requires public policies that drive instead of discourage change," she said. "Initiatives such as these would give New York a leadership role in the nation's progress toward sustainable transportation."

### Bronx Fleet at the Vanguard



INFORM President Joanna Underwood joined Congressman José Serrano in February to congratulate Manhattan Beer Co. on

converting its 15-truck delivery fleet to compressed natural gas. In taking this pioneering step, the company is contributing to cleaner air for New York City while making its own operations more efficient and secure. Over the next 12 years, Manhattan Beer's trucks will displace approximately 540,000 gallons of highly polluting diesel fuel and prevent 177 tons of emissions — an especially important benefit in the South Bronx neighborhood surrounding the company's distribution facility, where the asthma hospitalization rate for children is 21 times higher than in wealthier neighborhoods. The fleet sets an example for commercial vehicles in New York City and across the nation.

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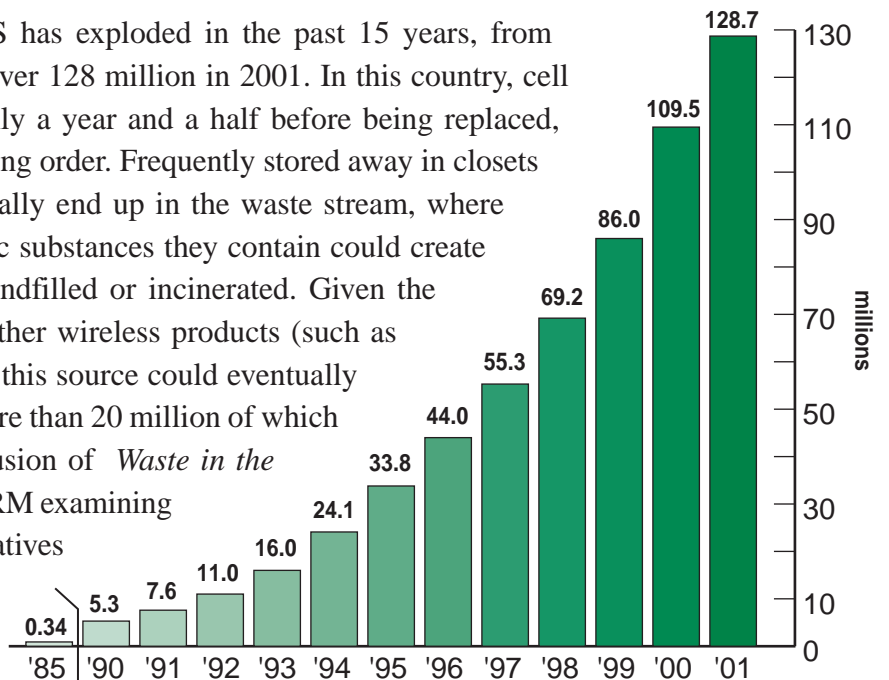
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## INFORMation: Wireless Waste Proliferates

The use of cell phones in the US has exploded in the past 15 years, from 340,000 subscribers in 1985 to over 128 million in 2001. In this country, cell phones are typically used for only a year and a half before being replaced, even though they are often in good working order. Frequently stored away in closets and drawers, these products will eventually end up in the waste stream, where cadmium, lead, and the many other toxic substances they contain could create health and environmental risks when landfilled or incinerated. Given the growing profusion of cell phones and other wireless products (such as Palm Pilots and pagers), the waste from this source could eventually exceed that from wired computers — more than 20 million of which are retired each year. This is one conclusion of *Waste in the Wireless World*, a new report from INFORM examining government policies and corporate initiatives in the US and abroad that aim to manage these products at end of life in ways that prevent their impacts on the environment and public health.



US Cell Phone Subscribers, 1985 to 2001