



Minnesota Moves to Drive Mercury Out of the Environment

In an ongoing effort to reduce mercury in the environment, Minnesota has taken steps to purchase, use, and sell vehicles that are free of this dangerous persistent, bioaccumulative toxin (PBT).

When the state went out to bid for model year 2002 vehicles in the fall of 2001, automotive manufacturers and dealers were put on notice that Minnesota will require all vehicles to be free of mercury within three years. As a first step, the [bid solicitation](#) requires disclosure of mercury (as well as vinyl) components in vehicles. Furthermore, the state's central motor pool is replacing mercury-containing light switches with mercury-free alternatives in its vehicles and in those that it puts up for auction.

The primary uses of mercury in vehicles are in switches contained in hood and trunk lights and in antilock braking systems. While US automakers agreed in the early 1990s to voluntarily phase out mercury switches, mercury has yet to be completely eliminated — even though mercury-free components are available, comparably priced, and in use, primarily by foreign automakers. Relatively small amounts of mercury are also used in high-intensity discharge (HID) headlamps, ride control switches, and navigational displays. These new applications of mercury in vehicles are a concern because their use is on the rise.

Minnesota's Department of Administration is encouraging state agencies to use the disclosure information required in the new bid when selecting 2002 vehicles. This sends a clear message to automakers to design vehicles without mercury — and the message is getting through. In response to the new bid (and other efforts by the [Clean Car Campaign](#), a coalition of national and regional environmental organizations), General Motors announced in February 2002 that it plans to end its use of mercury light switches immediately, nearly a year ahead of the company's own deadline for phaseout. The state of Indiana has included similar disclosure requirements in its vehicle bid, and New Jersey is considering ways to incorporate such environmental considerations into its purchasing decisions as well.

An estimated 215 million mercury switches are in vehicles currently on the road, each with about a gram of mercury, according to the report *Toxics in Vehicles*. Much of this mercury will be released to the environment when the vehicles are scrapped and sent to steel smelters for recycling, unless the mercury is recovered. Recognizing this, Tim Morse, Minnesota's Travel Management Division Director said: "We are checking vehicles as they come in for routine servicing. The mechanics were able to check about 100 cars that recently went to auction and found about 20 mercury switches, primarily in Ford Taurus and Crown Victoria cars. We're finding that it's very easy and only takes a couple of minutes to check the vehicle and remove or replace the switch." In appreciation of Minnesota's commitment to preventing mercury releases from fleet vehicles, mercury-free switches were donated to the state by the Clean Car Campaign. Typically, these cost between 20 and 40 cents per switch.

Minnesota's 2002 vehicle bid solicitation includes several other new elements besides the mercury and vinyl disclosure requirements. Vendors must now provide their vehicles' mileage and emissions ratings, and there are new categories for high-mileage and electric hybrid vehicles. These changes make it easier for purchasers to identify and select more fuel-efficient and less polluting vehicles, and thereby reduce releases of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, naphthalene, and other PBTs from the state's fleet.

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