



N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources

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STATE/LOCAL PARTNERSHIP ASSISTS TOWN OF TRYON IN MERCURY REDUCTION EFFORTS

TRYON – Officials from this western North Carolina town joined with state and local officials in May for the state's first ever mercury waste collection day, where more than 175 pounds of mercury-containing items were collected from area residents and businesses for proper management and recycling.

Last October, Tryon officials joined forces with Waste Reduction Partners (WRP) and the N.C. Division of Pollution Prevention and Environmental Assistance (DPPEA) in efforts to address the town's mercury issues. WRP is a team of highly experienced volunteer engineers, architects and scientists that provides western North Carolina businesses with no-cost waste and energy reduction assessments. WRP and DPPEA staff developed a public education campaign to inform area businesses and residents of the wastewater compliance issues. The campaign included a series of six mercury education articles in the local newspaper in the weeks prior to the mercury collection day, when residents and businesses were encouraged to bring in common mercury-containing products, such as thermometers, barometers, fluorescent lights and button cell batteries for proper recycling and disposal.

The public education campaign is just one prong of a multifaceted approach the town is taking to address elevated mercury levels in the town's wastewater. In addition to the campaign, town officials have followed up on a list of comprehensive mercury reduction recommendations from WRP, including: using cleaner water sampling techniques, modifying pretreatment permits for dental offices, and modifying NPDES (National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System) permits.

DPPEA introduced another approach to reducing the town's mercury by implementing the voluntary "Silver Star" program. Thirteen local businesses, including jewelers, dentists, hardware stores, pharmacies and automotive service shops, have promised to help reduce mercury in the environment by pledging to:

- Discontinue the purchase and sales of mercury-containing equipment and products where nonhazardous alternatives are available;
- Replace existing mercury devices with nonhazardous devices whenever possible;
- Properly manage mercury-containing wastes by collecting them for proper disposal; and
- Educate employees about sources of mercury and proper mercury management.

Since the Division of Water Quality established the mercury limit in 1994 as part of the town's wastewater permit, the Town of Tryon has exceeded the mercury limit numerous times, even after beginning a program to better identify and control sources of mercury entering its wastewater system. Following the establishment of the educational campaign and collection day, the town's wastewater effluent has been below detection levels for mercury for nine months.

When mercury is released into the environment, bacteria may convert some portion into methyl mercury, a potent neurotoxin. Methyl mercury-contaminated fish can cause fetal damage if eaten by pregnant women. Long-term exposure to mercury can cause neurological damage in children, and in high concentrations can damage the adult central nervous system and brain.

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DENR created a mercury task force last year comprised of members from DPPEA, Air Quality, Water Quality, Waste Management, and the Department of Health and Human Services. A resolution passed by the state's Environmental Management Commission in February requested that the state provide funding for enhancing monitoring and public education efforts in mercury.

DPPEA provides free, non-regulatory technical assistance and education on methods to eliminate, reduce or recycle wastes before they become pollutants or require disposal.

For more information, please contact Terry Albrecht, Waste Reduction Partners, at (828) 23 2-5080 or terry.albrecht@ncmail.net; Julie Woosley, DPPEA environmental chemist, (919) 715 -6527 or Julie.Woosley@ncmail.net; or Joel Burrell, Town of Tryon Wastewater Treatment, at (828) 859 -5626.

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