Indiana Department of Environmental Management **FACT SHEET**
(800) 451-6027 *www.IN.gov/idem* *January 2003*

Mercury Awareness in Schools

What is mercury?

- Mercury is a versatile element that can be gas, liquid, or solid. It is naturally occurring, conducts electricity, and expands and contracts with room temperatures changes and/or fluctuations.
- Mercury is a useful but extremely toxic ingredient in many household, medical and industrial products.

How could having mercury-containing items in schools be a problem?

- Children are more prone to mercury poisoning than adults, and are more likely to have serious effects from long-term exposure to mercury vapors.
- Mercury poisoning affects the human brain, spinal cord, kidneys, and liver.
- Long-term exposure to mercury can result in symptoms that can progressively worsen and lead to personality changes, stupor, and coma.
- If a spill occurs, proper clean up is costly, difficult, and dangerous.
- If cleaned-up or stored improperly, evaporation of mercury can occur, contaminating the air and exposing all that breathe it.

Where can mercury be found in schools?

- **Science and Chemistry Laboratories and Classrooms:**
  Check for mercury thermometers, air pressure gauges, mercury compounds, and elemental mercury. Mercury may have been used historically in a school's laboratory. The laboratory may still have containers of mercury or mercury compounds in storage.
- **School Classrooms and Facilities:**
  Look for mercury-containing thermostats, thermometers, barometers, silent wall switches, and in fluorescent light bulbs. It is simple and economical to find mercury-free alternatives for these products.
- **The Nurse's Office:**
  You may find the nurse's office to have the most elemental mercury in the school. In fact, thermometers and blood pressure measuring devices may contain several pounds of mercury. There are also certain nasal sprays and contact lens solutions that contain thimerosal, phenylmercuric acetate, or phenylmercuric nitrate. These compounds all have mercury in them, and have mercury free alternatives.
- A more extensive list of Mercury containing items can be found at www.in.gov/idem/mercury.

Once schools have identified the mercury, how can they dispose of it properly?

- Recycling mercury-containing items is the *only* safe way to dispose of them properly.
- Even very small amounts of mercury that are disposed of improperly can harm the environment. It only takes 3 grams (approximately 1/25 of a teaspoon) to contaminate a 60-acre lake.
- Improper disposal methods include:
  - Pouring it down the drain.
  - Putting it in the trash.
  - Burning it in barrels or incinerators.
- Although recycling mercury can be a costly endeavor if done independently, the Indiana Household Hazardous Waste Task Force and the Indiana Department of Environmental Management are currently offering **recycling assistance with mercury and mercury-containing items** through participation in the Mercury Reduction and Recycling for Schools Pledge Program.
- Participation in the program involves taking inventory of your school's mercury-containing items, taking them to your local Solid Waste Management District for recycling, and planning to phase out mercury-containing devices still in use, replacing them with mercury free alternatives when the time comes.

Why is now the best time for schools to properly dispose of their mercury and mercury-containing items?

- According to House Enrolled Act 1901, **effective July 1, 2003**, **public and nonpublic schools may not purchase or use mercury commodities, mercury compounds, or other mercury-instructional aids** in primary and secondary classrooms.
- Disposal of mercury items will be necessary. *Proper* disposal is imperative.

Where can I get more information?

For more information on IDEM's involvement with HEA 1901, contact the Office of Planning and Assessment at (800) 451-6027, extension 3-0701. Or log on to IDEM's Web site at: www.IN.gov/idem/mercury.

A complete copy of House Enrolled Act 1901 is also available at:
http://www.in.gov/idem/busleg/2001/HEA1901.pdf.