

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT



Office of Solid Waste

Environmental Fact Sheet

EPA's Comprehensive Review of the Treatment Standards for Mercury-Bearing Hazardous Waste

Mercury releases into the environment have the potential to pose long-term threats to human health, particularly among children, and to our environment. In light of these concerns, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is announcing a comprehensive review of the standards governing how mercury-bearing hazardous waste is treated prior to land disposal. EPA's goal is to ensure that its hazardous waste treatment standards are as effective as possible in protecting human health and the environment. This advance notice presents for public review and comment EPA's data on mercury-bearing hazardous waste, a series of technical and policy issues regarding mercury waste treatment, and potential avenues by which current mercury treatment standards might be revised.

Background

Mercury is recognized as a persistent, bioaccumulative, and toxic substance in our environment. Recent studies, including EPA's 1997 *Mercury Study Report to Congress*, show that long-term exposure to mercury can adversely affect human health, particularly in our children, and our environment. EPA is therefore concerned that even small mercury releases may contribute to its buildup in the environment and increase the potential for adverse impacts. Our goal is therefore to minimize mercury releases to the environment, consistent with our current statutory and regulatory obligations.

Action

As one of twelve significant actions identified in EPA's draft Action Plan for Mercury, the Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (ANPRM) published on May 28, 1999 (*64 Federal Register 28949*) announces EPA's comprehensive review of the standards for treating mercury-bearing hazardous waste. This set of standards is among those commonly referred to as the Land Disposal Restrictions (or LDRs).

The ANPRM has three overall features. First, EPA's waste generation and treatment data for mercury-bearing hazardous wastes are presented for review and updating. These data are broken down by industrial sector and by treatment type.

Second, EPA presents a number of technical and policy issues for public discussion. These include: (1) whether current treatment regulations that include requirements for incineration and retorting (a thermal process for recovering mercury from the waste) are appropriate in light of the potential for releases of mercury to the environment; (2) the extent to which alternative treatment options are available and effective for mercury-bearing hazardous wastes; and (3) the identification of incentives to minimize the generation of mercury hazardous wastes.

Third, the ANPRM indicates several potential avenues by which current mercury treatment standards might be revised. These include building in incentives to minimize the generation of mercury-bearing hazardous waste, increased use of stabilization treatment processes in lieu of thermal treatment processes, and special consideration for mixed wastes that contain both mercury and radionuclides.

EPA in the ANPRM emphasizes that no decisions have been made on what regulatory changes, if any, will ultimately be proposed. The ANPRM is intended to present EPA's latest data and potential concerns for public review and comment prior to the development of any specific regulatory amendments. EPA currently expects that any such amendments would be proposed for further review and comment in the year 2000.

For More Information

The *Federal Register* notice and this fact sheet are available in electronic format on the Internet at <http://www.epa.gov/epaoswer/hazwaste/ldr/mercury/index.htm>. For additional information or to order paper copies of any documents, call the RCRA Hotline. Callers within the Washington Metropolitan Area must dial 703-412-9810 or TDD 703-412-3323 (hearing impaired). Long-distance callers may call 1-800-424-9346 or TDD 1-800-553-7672. The RCRA Hotline operates weekdays, 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Write to the RCRA Information Center (5305W), US EPA, 401 M Street, SW, Washington, DC 20460. Address e-mail to RCRA-Docket@epa.gov.