

Thermostat Revolutions Lead to Recycling

By David Goldstein, PWA, IWMD

Those who sat out the first thermostat revolution are now being tempted to participate in a second one because the rewards of victory are worth more money. The first revolution replaced mercury devices with more convenient digital ones. Now, a second revolution is replacing both digital and remaining mercury thermostats with smart controllers, enabling owners to set temperatures via their phones from a remote location.

Smart controls lead to not just increased convenience but also to large energy savings, especially in hotels, where guests frequently leave heat or air conditioning on in a room after checking out. Schools, institutions, and office buildings are other prime candidates for energy savings through remote sensing and shut-off of temperature controls.

However, as with most revolutions, victory comes with danger. Disposal of mercury is so risky, there is only one mercury recycler in the entire United States. Getting the mercury to that recycler, Bethlehem Apparatus in Illinois, is the job of a large cadre, ranging from the hosts of collection points to the organizers of collection vehicles, and the public agencies, nonprofits, and hired guns who organize community outreach.

Utility companies are funding the insurgent forces of change, sponsoring a new incentive program coordinated by the Thermostat Recycling Corporation, a nonprofit corporation helping companies which manufactured mercury thermostats comply with California laws requiring collection programs. The program offers \$5 per thermostat to organizations able to return buckets – via pre-paid mailer – full of removed mercury thermostats, according to Stephen Groner, whose public relations firm, Groner & Associates, is handling public relations for the program.

According to John Burnett, National Sales Manager for MDS Recyclers, mercury thermostats contain more mercury than 500 fluorescent bulbs. While a four foot fluorescent tube has only enough mercury to fit into the tip of a ballpoint pen, an old thermostat has several drops contained in a glass bulb. Burnett's company collects thermostats, along with batteries and fluorescent tubes, from free drop-off programs at home improvement stores, hardware stores, and other locations.

SoCalGas is also further incentivizing the revolution by offering up to \$75 per home for participation in their Smart Thermostat program for customers who enroll in their program by March 1 and allow a visit by April 1. To access this program, customers must have a Nest or Ecobee brand thermostat and the utility offers \$50 discounts off of these devices. Participants "can expect up to five 'conservation events' in winter months," during which the utility may turn down the customer's thermostat by "a few degrees," according to a SoCal Gas press release, but customers can override the utility's direction without penalty.

When you have a new thermostat installed, check with your installer ensure they recycle the old one. If they do not, or if you are changing your own thermostat, bring your mercury device to a participating home improvement or hardware store near you, or check www.thermostat-recycle.org for a thermostat company or government organized hazardous waste collection event allowing drop-offs.