

Briefing on new Mercury Barometers ban

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6th June 2007

What is the legislation about?

- Mercury is a highly toxic substance which can be extremely harmful to the environment and human health even at low concentrations.
- Studies show that mercury exposure can cause brain damage and severe development disorders with the most vulnerable groups being pregnant women and young children.
- Earlier this year The British Medical Journal reported a study saying that 1 in 6 women have mercury concentrations above what is widely accepted as safe.
- The new EU rules will phase out the use of mercury in measuring devices like thermometers and barometers where alternatives are available. This will reduce the amount of mercury getting into the waste stream and eventually finding its way into our food chain.
- The repair, restoration and sale of existing barometers are not affected by this legislation.
- The ban is supported by 27 governments and the majority of MEPs who believe that mercury is a highly dangerous substance and should be banned where alternatives exist.

Is the traditional British Barometer being banned?

- **No.** The ban on mercury will mean a small number of manufacturers of decorative barometers will no longer be able to produce these mercury barometers, but they can still make non-mercury barometers (as they do already) and the market for these products remains strong.
- Labour MEPs have listened to the concerns of industry and we have pushed for an extra 2 years to phase production out and give industry time to adapt. This phase out has now been agreed.
- ***You don't need mercury to make a barometer - and most modern barometers do not contain it precisely because it is so dangerous.*** To exclude barometers from the ban would be totally inconsistent with the new REACH directive on chemicals - which aims to phase out dangerous chemicals when alternatives are available. REACH was supported by all three of the largest British political parties.

Couldn't mercury barometers have been exempted from the rules?

- Under **WTO international trade rules**, we could not make an exception for just a small number of EU companies. We would have to continue allowing other countries to export mercury barometers to the EU, which would mean more mercury not less in circulation and a higher public risk.

But aren't UK jobs at stake?

- There are only 3 UK companies producing mercury barometers and a fourth company which is more involved with repair and restoration work.
- Most EU companies involved in the manufacture of barometers are already producing safer alternative varieties which are either aneroid or digital. These companies are also involved in repair and restoration work of existing barometers which will continue to be allowed under the new rules.
- Other industries like the chlor-alkali industry have recognised the need to move away from mercury use in their industrial process and toward safer alternatives. All industries must play their part however difficult in making sure we can all benefit from a safe healthy environment. Labour MEPs have fought hard to ensure that companies manufacturing mercury barometers have an adequate transition period.

The amount of mercury being used by the industry is so small - isn't the public health threat negligible?

- Barometers use large quantities of mercury (around 999 g more than a fever thermometer). Any barometer breakage poses a large risk of contamination and severe health effects, not to mention significant clean up costs.
- For example last month in the US, over 1000 school children were evacuated from an American school when a mercury barometer was found broken in a storeroom. Other recent mercury spills in public schools have resulted in massive clean up bills for local authorities. These are telling examples of the large scale public health concern that that these types of devices can pose.

Isn't this just the EU playing the "nanny state"?

- Concern about mercury containing products goes beyond Europe and is something which countries around the world are turning their attention to.

- Several US states have introduced laws banning mercury containing products. These states include Connecticut, Maine, New York, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington, Illinois, Maryland, and California. New Hampshire being the most recent to consider action.
- The State of Minnesota is even proposing to ban all *existing* mercury barometers and other mercury containing instruments in public schools. ***The EU is not alone in taking action on this issue.***