

# Mercury, other heavy metals cause concern

On Nov. 5, Oakland voters will decide a bond proposal to finance the proposed \$500 million solid waste program, the most expensive in county history. This is part of a continuing series on the solid waste program, and the controversy it has generated.

By Pat Murphy  
staff writer

When people discuss potential health hazards linked to the proposed Auburn Hills Incinerator, talk quickly turns to mercury — the heavy metal that can cause birth defects and brain damage.

Understandably, the operating permit proposed for the Auburn Hills incinerator — cornerstone of Oakland's proposed solid waste program — allows it to spew as much as two tons of heavy metals, including mercury, into the atmosphere each year it operates at or near capacity.

Clean Water Action (CWA) is the most recent organization to take issue of mercury pollution. Last week the Lansing-based environmental group called for a ban on all new incinerators in Michigan, including the one proposed for Oakland County, until laws are enacted to require that materials containing mercury be separated from the waste stream.

THE ORGANIZATION also called for a legislative limitation on the mercury content of batteries and measures to limit airborne mercury contamination crossing state and provincial lines.

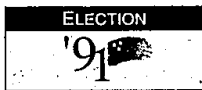
But CWA also made a statement that irks Oakland officials who support the Auburn Hills Incinerator. In a press release summarizing an 11-page report on mercury pollution in Michigan, CWA suggested Oakland officials may be less concerned about mercury contamination than state officials.

"An internal DNR memo says the actual impact of mercury released from the (proposed) incinerator (on) Lower Trout Lake may be much higher than projected by the County," the release stated. Lower Trout Lake is an Oakland County lake where mercury levels in fish are reportedly at or above recommended levels.

Local officials, including Roger Smith and Ann Hobart, deputy director and public information specialist, respectively, for the county's department of solid waste management, take umbrage at that statement and others like it.

"THEY IMPLY that DNR officials are more concerned than we are," said Hobart. "That's not true. We're environmentalists too."

Hobart was a county commission-



er from Waterford Township before resigning to become spokesman for the trash program.

"I've been recycling for years," Hobart said. "I took this job to promote a good solid waste program."

"We trust that most of the members of Clean Water Action and other environmental groups are sincere," she said.

"Even within the DNR, there are people who support, and oppose, incineration. But they're sincere. . . I just wish they (CWA) would give us the same."

Smith concedes that county and DNR officials disagree regularly about the extent and effect of mercury contamination as well as other things. "But they're all legitimate differences of opinion," he emphasized.

PART OF the dispute on mercury, Smith said, stems from the fact that few agencies agree on what is considered safe or acceptable levels of mercury contamination. Furthermore, as soon as standards start to emerge, "they're changed," he said.

"We used to talk in terms of parts

per million. Now it's parts per billion."

Smith doesn't object to more stringent standards. "But a moving target makes it difficult to make valid comparisons."

That shouldn't matter, according to anti-incineration critics like Paul H. Connitt, a nationally known expert who spoke out against Oakland's incinerators in Auburn Hills and Madison Heights. He's an associate professor of chemistry at St. Lawrence University in New York but has participated in numerous international conferences on trash and waste disposal.

Connitt has also been a consultant to a number of governmental agencies, including the Province of Ontario where earlier this year officials imposed a ban on new incinerators.

"THERE IS no safe level for mercury," Connitt told Oakland residents last fall. "Any science that says incinerators are safe is bad science."

As an example of out-of-control contamination, Connitt and other incineration foes point to places like southeast Florida where mercury is polluting the Everglades.

State officials caution against eating fish from the Everglades and say excessive levels of mercury have been found in alligators and other

animals. A 4-year-old panther is believed to have died from mercury contamination after losing much of its ability to walk or see, according to a spokesman from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Florida officials believe the airborne mercury comes from garbage incinerators, coal or gas-fired power plants and the sugarcane industry.

But comparisons between incinerators in Florida and other states and the one proposed in Auburn Hills is unfair, according to Roger Smith, who was director of public services in Southfield before becoming deputy director of the county's solid waste management. Other incinerators simply aren't in the same category as others, he said.

TO COMPARE Oakland's incinerator with those in Florida, or Detroit, is like comparing the emissions of a 1992 automobile — equipped with catalytic converter and other emission-control equipment — to those of a 1965 gas guzzler.

"There's just no comparison," Smith said. "Our incinerator will have bag houses, scrubbers and other mercury controls those others don't have."

Why then, does the operating permit for Oakland's incinerator specify that the Auburn Hills facility is allowed to emit up to 4,000 pounds of

mercury and other heavy metals?

"To begin with, heavy metals from our incinerator will be in the form of a gas spread out over a year," Smith said. "Emissions will be in tiny particles (micrograms)." A microgram is the equivalent of one-one-millionth of a gram.

More important, Smith said, those emission levels are a worst-case scenario. Actual emissions won't come close to that level, he said.

EMISSIONS WILL be 99.7 percent clear, Smith said, with state officials (the regional DNR office in Livonia) monitoring output instantaneously. But that's just the beginning. Smith emphasized, Oakland's system may be able to eliminate virtually every chance of mercury contamination by filtering sources of the hazardous material out of the waste stream.

A report submitted to the Office of Solid Waste of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says that most mercury in municipal waste streams comes from household batteries, electric lighting, thermometers, thermostats, paint pigments, dental offices, light switches and film pack batteries.

Separate these from the waste stream, says the report, and communities can virtually eliminate as a major concern.

## Campaign to inform voters costs \$47,000; draws criticism

By Pat Murphy  
staff writer

The committee promoting the county's solid waste program already has spent more than \$47,000 to sway voters.

Most of the money came from the Westinghouse Electric Corp. according to statements filed Friday with the Election Division of the Oakland County Clerk's Office.

Westinghouse has a contract to build a \$180 million waste-to-energy incinerator, the cornerstone of the county's solid waste program, in Auburn Hills.

ON NOV. 5, Oakland residents will vote on a proposal to finance the waste program with county-guaranteed bonds. The preliminary statements filed Friday disclosed contributions and expenditures for the Committee for Responsible Solid Waste Management through Oct. 21.

"The committee was formed because there was so much misinformation (about the waste plan)," said County Commissioner Roy Newbold,

who is also the major spokesman for the committee. "We wanted to set the record straight and give voters the facts, not unsubstantiated charges."

There is evidence, however, that efforts by the committee may have an opposite effect.

Also on Friday, for example, the East Michigan Environmental Action Council issued a press release urging voters to vote no on the upcoming bond proposal.

THAT'S A departure from the group's usual course of action prior to an election, said the organization's director, Elizabeth Harris. "Usually we just take a position. But this time, we adopted a 'vote no' position."

The departure was necessary, Harris said, "because EMEAC's position on the solid waste bond issue was misrepresented in a brochure put out by a group supporting the incinerator."

That group is the Committee for Responsible Solid Waste Management, which originally listed

EMEAC as a supporter of the solid waste program.

EMEAC was more supportive of the waste program previously, said Harris. But in September the organization re-evaluated its position. EMEAC favors waste reduction, reuse and recycling and opposes construction of incinerators.

"THE NEED for a new incinerator has not been shown," said Harris. Steve Mitchell, a consultant hired by Westinghouse for the committee, said he takes responsibility for any error. There was some confusion initially, but EMEAC did not support the waste program, he said. "I apologize for any misinformation."

Mitchell is president of Mitchell Research and Communications Inc. in East Lansing and treasurer for the committee for responsible solid waste management. He is also the husband of Susan Singer, county public information officer for Executive Daniel T. Murphy. Singer and Mitchell were married in September.

CRITICISM OF the committee's public information campaign also

drew criticism from a Southfield resident Friday. Artie Fields, an ad hoc spokesman for the Southfield Home Owners Coalition, said his organization is upset about what it considers as "the misleading nature" of brochures and other literature.

"The brochures show kids and emphasize the future," said Fields, a former school board member. "You

have to look twice to find any mention about the incinerator. And there's no mention of Westinghouse." Fields said his coalition, which includes 30 subdivisions, has not taken a position for or against the bond

proposal. But it is concerned about the public information campaign, he said.

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