

Mercury–hunting in the Gothenburg region 1998-1999



The environmental risks of the hidden mercury has to be more widely recognised!
Here you can read about one of several successful mercury projects initiated by SEPA, the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency.

Background

The Swedish Government has decided that mercury is so hazardous that it should be removed from the ecocycle. Bans have been passed on the manufacturing and sale as well as on uses of certain goods containing mercury. Import and export is also very restricted.

The government gave the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency special funding for assignments involving mercury. One part of the five-year action plan from 1994 to 1999 aims at removing as many products containing mercury as possible from our environment, and another to find a suitable disposal method for the waste.

Hidden mercury in technical products

Swedish EPA has estimated the amount of hidden mercury to several hundred tonnes in Sweden. About 30 to 50 tonnes are believed to be in use in electrical and other technical appliances and instruments, for instance switches, relays, level indicators, alarms, thermostats, thermometers and flow meters.

You will find mercury in such different products as door bells, reffridgerators, coffee machines, boilers, sphygmomanometers, pin ball machines, welding benches and many, many more. When these products are discarded as waste without special precautions, the hidden mercury will eventually contaminate the environment.

Mercury–hunting in collaboration

The Gothenburg Region Association of Local Authorities (GR) applied for money offered from SEPA to run one of several joint projects. GR consists of 13 municipalities, and the participant in the project was their project group with representatives from all the environmental health offices in this region.

This project collaborated with similar projects in other counties, using the same information material and database. We also worked with the military authorities and the scrap metal business.

Electricians as mercury detectives

The project hired 13 unemployed electricians. These so called mercury detectives were given three weeks of special training on environmental issues, work safety rules, hazardous waste and mercury legislation, presentation technique etc. The electricians were given special authorisation from the county to allow them to transport hazardous waste.

Free handing in of mercury

They visited local businesses, industries, property owners, municipal sewage and energy authorities etc, to help them identify their mercury products. During the project, the handing in of mercury products was free of charge. Products still in use were marked with a special orange warning label with instructions to treat the mercury as hazardous waste.

Results

During this regional project we visited 1.500 places in the municipalities. Half a tonne of mercury in 25. 000 products was handed in for terminal storage. The remaining 8.200 products or 2 tonnes were labelled in place. One huge "discovery" was a rectifier power station built in the sixties, with 1,8 tonnes of mercury.

Most of the companies visited had no idea that they had so much mercury in different products, and were very surprised at the amounts found.

Interaction is lacking between different parties at for instance demolition or renovation jobs, and between building and environmental authorities. The laws concerning the handling of hazardous waste and mercury are not followed. The environmental risks of the hidden mercury has to be more widely recognized!

More facts about mercury hunting

For more information about the mercury projects please visit the website of the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, <http://www.viron.se/>. There is some information on the website in English about mercury at present, under "**Issues**" but there are also several interesting reports to order if you want to read more about different projects.

At <http://www.mil.se> at the military forces, there is some general information in English, see the little flag at the bottom of the page. But if you click the **SEPA mercury logotype** (the red triangle with "kvicksilver" launched by SEPA) and then down to the last page indicated in the left column: "**HITTAT (komponenter innehållande Hg)**" you will find a lot of photographs of different products that contain mercury.

At the County of Värmland website www.s.lst.se you will also find plenty of good photos: Under the chapter "**Projekt**" you click "**Kvicksilverjakten i Värmlands län**" and then at the bottom of that page "**Ut med kvicksilver ur kretsloppet**".

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