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## **County dental clinics work to prevent mercury pollution** *New measures will remove up to 99% of dental mercury from wastewater*

Multnomah County Health Department is taking steps to prevent mercury pollution by installing mercury amalgam separators at its four dental clinics. An amalgam separator is designed to remove waste amalgam from the rinse water in the vacuum line before discharge to sewer. Amalgam separators can remove up to 99 percent of the mercury from wastewater before it is discharged from the dental office.

Mercury is a heavy metal that enters the environment and transforms to methylmercury. Methylmercury in waterways bioaccumulates in fish. Oregonians are most directly exposed to mercury by eating contaminated fish. A fish consumption advisory is in effect for the entire main stem of the Willamette River due to mercury contamination. While the amount of mercury released from dental clinics is only a portion of the mercury going into the environment, it is identifiable and controllable.

Until now, participation in this type of pollution prevention program has been voluntary. In Oregon, Senate Bill 704 was signed into law in 2007. The bill requires installation of amalgam separators in Oregon dental clinics (including county community dental clinics) later this year.

According to Jane Haley-Harris - Executive Director, Oregon Center for Environmental Health, "We applaud the county for taking a leadership role in addressing the very serious problem of mercury entering the environment and the food chain through disposal from dental offices."

The Health Department's action is three years ahead of upcoming state requirements and aligns with the county's Toxics Reduction Strategy. The Toxics Reduction Strategy was adopted in 2006 by the Multnomah County Board and the City of Portland ([Resolution 06-073](#)), with the vision to "promote a healthy community and environment by eliminating the governmental purchase, release and use of toxic substances that present potential negative health or environmental impacts." The goal of the program is to "use the Precautionary Principle as a framework to replace toxic substances, materials or products of concern with viable least-toxic alternatives by 2020."

Oregon Department of Environmental Quality offers a tax credit to dental offices installing amalgam separators. For more information visit their website at <http://www.deq.state.or.us/msd/taxcredits/amalgam.htm>

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