

EPA Emergency Response Site Update

Helena Mercury Release

Operations Period 05

June 5, 2024

Safety Message

Mercury is a contaminant that is toxic to humans at very low levels and is easily spread.

The bathhouse has been cleared for use by guests of the retreat. The garage has been secured as an Exclusion Zone and EPA's response team is blocking a significant portion of the retreat center's parking lot.

[Website](#)

Site Description

On May 30, 2024, an employee picked up an unlabeled bottle while cleaning out a detached garage at a yoga retreat center. The bottle was heavier than expected and slipped from his hand. The bottle hit a work bench and shattered, which resulted in a reported 500mL of mercury being released to the garage (note the response team has already collected more than 500mL of mercury). The employee left the garage, bagged their contaminated clothing just outside the door, walked to a nearby bathhouse and rinsed themselves in a common shower used by guests. Staff at the retreat center closed and isolated the garage before calling the National Response Center.

An EPA response team arrived on May 31, 2024 and initiated a response effort.

Site Objectives

- Safety of the employees of the retreat center, its guests and response personnel is top priority.
- Collect and dispose of recoverable mercury.
- Clear the bathhouse for use (**complete**).
- Clear the garage for use to the extent practical.
- Provide timely and accurate communication of response information to the public and stakeholders.

Operations Period Objectives

1. Maintain exclusion, contaminant reduction and support zones.
2. Continue effort in the garage.

Operations Period Accomplishments

The EPA response team collected readings from the air inside the garage at the start of the day. These readings were extremely high and exceeded the capabilities of the instrumentation being used (Jerome mercury meter). This test result indicated the team could not enter the work zone until the building had been ventilated. The team opened the doors, continued to monitor air quality and entered the exclusion zone after roughly 30 minutes. The high readings were likely a result of the workbench area where the release occurred being only partially demolished and the elemental mercury in the area that had yet to be collected.

The response team improved the plastic sheeting isolating the workbench area and created a second contaminant reduction zone outside this area. The team continued to slowly dismantle the shelves and bench. The shelves and plywood wall above and behind the workbench were also removed. Elemental mercury beads

were encountered throughout this process and the team often stopped the demolition to vacuum the floor within the exclusion zone.

A mercury vacuum broke down after lunch (the remaining mercury vacuum on-site broke down during a previous Operations Period). A replacement mercury vacuum was sent to the Site from Billings and should be available for use during the next Operations Period.

The response team continued to decontaminate several items that the non-profit would have difficulty replacing and requested that EPA salvage. Several power tools, the riding mower and other items were released to the property owner. Other items continue to be decontaminated.

The response team did not perform nighttime heat and vent activities in the buildings as planned. Once the team has performed this heat and vent process, the team will seal the garage floor and initiate an 8-hr clearance test to accurately measure the amount of residual mercury vapor in the breathing zone.

View of garage.



Demolishing the work bench area.



Decontaminating items to be returned to property owner.

