

Keeping the World Cleaner, one gram at a time

By Luke Hendry

Saturday January 29, 2005

STIRLING-RAWDON—Bruce Woodbeck is helping save the planet one gram at a time.

Woodbeck, the 55-year-old owner of Woodbeck Auto Parts in this village northwest of Belleville, was given virtual hero status Friday as he hosted Ontario Environment Minister Leona Dombrowsky, local politicians, and dignitaries from the Toronto-based Clean Air Foundation (CAF), Environment Canada, the Federation of Ontario Cottagers' Associations, and other groups.

But as the easy-going businessman will tell you, what he's doing is simple—and a matter of common sense.

In 1998, Woodbeck learned of a European program diverting mercury switches from vehicles. The switches, which contain about 0.85 grams of the toxin, were until recently found in the under-hood and trunk light switches of automobiles.

Mercury is a neurotoxin that can cause brain damage, birth defects, kidney failure, respiratory and liver damage, and has been linked to autism in children, the CAF reports. The group is a not-for-profit agency creating, implementing, and managing emissions-reduction programs.

According to the foundation, a gram of mercury can pollute a 20-acre lake (eight hectare) lake to the point that no fish would be safe for human consumption. One millionth of a gram is enough to poison a dinner serving of fish for an average child, CAF officials say.

But in Europe, auto recyclers were removing the switches from vehicles, ensure their safe disposal.

So in 1998, Woodbeck—who now employs a staff of 20 to recycle 1,500 vehicles a year—began directing his workers to do the same.

"I just looked at it and said, 'It's not an onerous task,'" he shrugged yesterday. "It's the right thing to do."

An angler, hunter, and outdoorsman, Woodbeck said he's well aware of the need to protect the environment and reduce pollution wherever possible—especially when it takes only a moment to remove the lights and the tiny switches inside.

"It's responsible citizenship," said Woodbeck, whose father Burton started the family business 65 years ago. "We have to realize that this planet's resources are exhaustible.

"The auto recyclers have not created these problems, but we are vital to the solution."

Now the environment ministry and CAF are hoping more recyclers follow his example by joining the foundation's Switch Out program. The national program started in Ontario in 2001 and spread to auto recyclers in Alberta in 2003 and British Columbia in 2004. The Maritime provinces and Québec are also interested, program manager Fatima Dharsee said.

The CAF provides auto wreckers with storage containers and prepaid shipping packages, meaning there is no added expense to collecting them. The switches are sent to Fluorescent Lamp Recyclers in Ayr, Ont. for safe disposal.

"It doesn't cost them anything other than a couple of minutes of their time and their dedication," said Dharsee.

“Bruce was pulling switches before Switch Out,” she noted. “He has since been one of the hardest-working Switch Out participants.”

“He’s a pioneer—absolutely,” said Dharsee. “He’s an advocate for cleaning up the auto recycling industry from top to bottom and this is just one aspect of that.”

About 165 Ontario recyclers are involved in Switch Out; across Canada, that increases to 430. The CAF says it’s the only program of its kind in Canada, and to date has collected over 74,000 switches.

Dharsee said that when educated about the process, business owners are quick to help.

“Once the recyclers become aware of the dangers of mercury, the program’s an easy sell,” she said.

“It makes good business sense,” Dharsee said, adding Woodbeck has also pushed for changes to licensing laws so that only licensed recyclers handle vehicles at the ends of their lives.

Dombrowsky, MPP, Hastings-Frontenac-Lennox and Addington, heaped praise on Woodbeck.

“Woodbeck Auto Parts is probably the best and most environmentally-friendly auto recyclers in Ontario and Canada, and probably North America,” she said, calling the owner “an inspiration to many in this community.”

She also spoke highly of the partnership the CAF has created between government, industry, and non-governmental organizations, and said more such partnerships are needed to protect the environment.

Dombrowsky said there are 17 million vehicles carrying over mercury on Canadian roads.

“This mercury will end up in the environment if we do not act,” she said, citing automobiles as the fourth-biggest source of mercury pollution.

Last year, Ontario’s government signed a three-year commitment with the CAF to collect over half a million switches by 2006.

“I’m proud it was the foresight of someone from this area that spawned an initiative that’s going to capture tons of mercury” and keep it from harming nature, the minister said. “This is the foundation of what I hope will become a national standard.”