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## Down to Earth Thoughts on Maine's environment

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March 14, 2008

### Disposing of drugs: Help is on the way

Reports that mood-stabilizers, hormones, antibiotics and other drugs are finding their way into drinking water supplies around the country are no surprise to Dr. Stevan Gressitt, a Bangor psychiatrist.

He'd been waiting for those headlines.

The more immediate issue for Gressitt is: What do we do about it?

Gressitt and others are about to roll out a program that could become a national alternative to simply flushing unused drugs down the toilet. Sometime this spring or summer, Maine will become the first state to test a mail-in drug-disposal program.

It'll happen just as concerns about the problem are peaking.

The Associated Press reported this week in newspapers across the country, including this one, that medications have been detected in public water supplies for 24 metropolitan areas around the country. While suppliers said the levels are so low that water remains safe to drink, the widespread presence of pharmaceuticals – and America's fast-growing appetite for drugs – worries a lot of scientists, as well as people who simply like their water chem-free.

"People are not happy about drugs in their water. That's not a scientific survey, that's just what I hear," Gressitt said.

No Maine water supplies have been tested at all for pharmaceuticals, according to state and local officials. The Portland Water District said this week its water is safe and unlikely to have any traces of drugs because of the way it protects Sebago Lake and disinfects the water.

Drugs get into the environment, and ultimately into drinking water, in two primary ways. First, people take medicine and then excrete the non-metabolized portions into the sewers. And second, people flush or throw away pills and ointments that have expired or no longer wanted.

Scientists are studying the metabolism problem. The flushing issue is where we come in.

There is a lot of disagreement around the country about what we should be doing with unwanted drugs. But everyone agrees that flushing them down the toilet is asking for trouble. Officials here also advise against throwing them into the trash.

Mainers are being advised to turn in the drugs to police departments or at periodic collection events. One such collection is coming up in the Bath and Brunswick area June 3, although details have not yet been announced.

The other official option in Maine is to hold onto the drugs in a safe place a little while longer, because help is on the way.

State agencies and the University of Maine Center on Aging plan to launch a pilot mail-in program this spring. Free drug-disposal mailers will be placed in selected drug stores in Cumberland, Aroostook, Kennebec and Penobscot counties. Later this year, the agencies will test the same program statewide.

Mailers will be addressed to the Maine Drug Enforcement Agency, which will make sure the medications are disposed of as hazardous waste.

Gressitt, who has helped lead efforts to find a statewide solution, said the next step will be to make the program permanent.

If we keep flushing, he said, Maine's water could make news, too. "We're not immune."

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**John** covers environmental issues for the Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram. A reporter for 20 years, he always hoped to find some use for his undergraduate degree in International Environmental Studies. He also has a master's degree in journalism, though back then they taught writing on a thing called a typewriter. He's married and has two children.

#### About this blog

Down To Earth is a place to keep tabs on the environment beat at the Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram. Staff Writer John Richardson will post updates on past news stories, share tidbits and behind-the-story stories, answer questions and get feedback and ideas from you.

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