

Catalytic converters: source of pollution?

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Massachusetts scientists say toxic metals from automotive catalytic converters have been detected for the first time in U.S. urban air.

The research was conducted by Swedish scientists working in collaboration with researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution.

The scientists found high concentrations of platinum, palladium, rhodium and osmium in air over the Boston metropolitan area. Although the particles are not yet considered a serious health risk, evidence suggests they potentially could pose a future danger as worldwide car sales increase from an estimated 50 million in 2000 to more than 140 million in 2050.

Finding ways to "stabilize" those metal particles within the converters "should be a priority to limit their potential impact," says lead researcher Sebastien Rauch of Chalmers University of Technology in Goteborg, Sweden. Scientists have also detected elevated concentrations of the elements in Europe, Japan, Australia, Ghana, China and Greenland.

Catalytic converters reduce emissions of carbon monoxide, hydrocarbons, nitrogen oxides and other pollutants.

The study is to appear in the Dec. 15 issue of the American Chemical Society's journal, Environmental Science and Technology.

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