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EPA Sets New Limits on Lead in Gasoline

[EPA press release - March 4, 1985]

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lee M. Thomas today announced final standards to cut the amount used in gasoline by 90 percent starting Jan. 1, 1986.

The new standard will limit the lead content of gasoline to 0.10 grams per gallon. The current standard allows 1.10 grams per leaded gallon.

The Administrator also set an interim standard of 0.50 grams per leaded gallon, effective July 1, 1985.

"There is no doubt in my mind that lead in the environment is still a major public health problem," Thomas said, "and that leaded gasoline is a major contributor to total lead exposure. Our goal today is to reduce this threat to the health of Americans everywhere, especially our children, as quickly as possible."

Adverse health effects from elevated levels of lead in blood range from behavior disorders and anemia to mental retardation and permanent nerve damage. EPA estimates that between 1985 and 1992 the new standards will result in almost one million fewer incidences of blood lead levels exceeding 25 micrograms per deciliter, the level recently established by the Centers for Disease Control as a measure of elevated blood lead levels.

Thomas said the new standards will also save about \$6 billion over the same period from reduced vehicle maintenance, reduced levels of exhaust emission pollutants (by discouraging misfueling), and lowered medical and rehabilitative costs that result from excess exposure to lead.

EPA is also considering a total ban on the use of lead in gasoline. However, before a final decision is made on the issue, the agency--through a supplemental proposal--is asking for comments on new information brought to its attention since former Administrator William D. Ruckelshaus proposed the revisions last July.

Specifically, EPA wants more information on the relationship of blood lead and blood pressure, a major factor in cardiovascular diseases, the amount of lead needed to protect certain engines from valve-seat recession, and the effectiveness of the 0.10 gplg standard in eliminating or reducing fuel switching.

EPA recently proposed a scheme to allow banking of lead rights to permit added flexibility in meeting the tighter standards. That rule should be finalized within the next few weeks.

In 1973, EPA initiated a "phasedown" program designed to bring the levels of lead down to 0.5 grams per gallon by 1980 in large refineries and by 1982 in small refineries. The standard allowed the refineries to average their total (both leaded and unleaded) output to reach the 0.5 standard.

In 1982, EPA changed the standard to 1.10 grams per leaded gallon but eliminated the provision that allowed averaging between unleaded and leaded gasoline. The new standard was projected to bring about a 34 percent greater reduction in the amount of lead being used by the refining industry, as demand for leaded gasoline declined.

According to EPA, lead use today is significantly higher than projected in 1982 when the current 1.10 gplg standard was set. The 1982 rulemaking predicted that lead usage in 1988 would be 21.4 billion grams, but today's estimates for 1988 are 35.7 billion grams--67 percent more than previously anticipated. EPA figures show that 16 percent of vehicles requiring unleaded gasoline are being fueled with leaded gasoline, causing a higher than expected lead usage.

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