

Proposed lead rules trigger protests from environmentalists

An Environmental Protection Agency proposal to relax limits on amounts of lead in gasoline is igniting immediate and bitter protests among consumer and environmental groups. Among the major criticisms of the proposal, announced last week by EPA Administrator Anne Gorsuch, is that it would probably increase substantially the number of urban children poisoned by lead each year, according to Clarence Ditlow of the Center for Auto Safety in Washington, D.C.

Under the Clean Air Act, EPA directed major refiners to phase down the use of lead as an octane booster in gasoline. When that phasedown began in 1975, the national average was two or three grams of lead per gallon of gasoline sold. By late 1980, larger refiners had been limited to using no more than 0.5 gpg lead in leaded grades of gasoline (an averaged limit computed by combining a refinery's total output of all leaded grades).

Prompting the phasedown had been a growing body of scientific and medical data identifying environmental exposure to lead as a major public health problem. As reported in the 1980 National Academy of Science survey, *Lead in the Human Environment*, EPA considered ambient-lead levels existing prior to the phasedown as constituting "sufficient risk of adverse physiological effects for a small but significant portion of the urban adult population, and up to 25 percent of the children in urban areas." EPA also noted at the time that combustion of leaded gasoline contributed the largest fraction of lead then reaching the environment — "at least 90 percent of airborne lead." And environmental groups contend leaded gasoline still contributes the largest fraction of environmental lead.

But according to the proposed EPA rule signed February 18, "Questions have arisen whether the proportion of the vehicle fleet requiring unleaded gasoline has reached a level such that the 0.5 standard [for major refiners] is no longer necessary." (Unleaded gas now totals roughly 52 percent of all gasoline sales.) "Accordingly," the proposed rule says, "EPA will consider relaxation or rescission of the lead-phasedown standard."

"That's baloney," says Eric Goldstein of the Natural Resources Defense Council in New York. Clean Air Act (CAA) revisions supported by the Reagan administration would, if implemented, likely increase future demand for leaded gasoline, he suggests. In particular, he says proposed CAA revisions affecting autos could make it possible for automakers to design new car models that meet emission standards without the use of a catalytic converter. And today that catalytic converter is the only thing limiting the use of leaded fuels, Goldstein notes, because there's no law limiting a car's lead emissions. "It's just a

quirk of fate that [a catalytic converter] is rendered inoperative if lead is deposited on it."

What's more, says Ditlow at the Center for Auto Safety, "EPA has already announced it is restricting emission standards for heavy trucks so they can run without catalysts and use leaded gasoline."

Even if some lead standard is ultimately deemed appropriate, however, the EPA proposal suggests that small refiners — those with a crude-oil capacity of 50,000 barrels per day or less (and not owned or controlled by a large refiner) — might be exempted from the standard or given a looser one since these firms account for so relatively small a fraction of the total automotive-lead use and because the capital costs of installing equipment to comply with the standard might prove economically prohibitive. (Initially, these small refiners were to have caught up with the large refiners' standard of 0.5 gpg in October of 1982. A separate proposed rule, also signed last week, would now suspend indefinitely the compliance date.)

According to EPA's proposed rule, whether the agency relaxes or rescinds the current lead-in-gasoline standards will be determined by data and cost-benefit analyses provided the agency over the next two months and by testimony presented at public hearings April 1-2. (Requests to testify must be submitted to the EPA by March 10.) EPA's Martha Casey noted that her agency will be considering all data submitted during the comment period, including those on health effects, before proposing a final standard. The current proposal outlines a range of options EPA is considering, the general basis for its proposing a relaxation in rules, and the type of material it is seeking to determine what degree of relaxation might be appropriate. One option specifically mentioned, for instance, suggests maintaining lead standards "only in areas with lead-emission problems."

On the forefront of organizations opposing EPA's proposed lead rules is the Consumers Union Foundation. Explains Jean Halloran, director of CU's regulatory-information network, "Consumers Union could not be more opposed to relaxing these regulations ... EPA evidently thinks preserving the intellectual capacities of poor children is less important than increasing oil-industry profits."

Halloran is referring to the fact that recent studies, such as those by Herbert Needleman (SN: 2/6/82, p. 88) show that even what had once been considered innocuous levels of exposure to lead are now being adversely associated with a child's IQ-test scores, reading comprehension and ability to concentrate.

Environmentalists such as Bambi Batts Young, director of the Environment and

Behavior Program at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, also point to studies suggesting that the public is paying dearly for lead-related health problems. Citing research by George Provenzano at the University of Illinois, she notes that crude and incomplete assessments put the cost of coping with excessive childhood lead exposure somewhere between \$400 million and \$1 billion annually in 1978 dollars. These estimates represent the cost of correcting lead-induced health and intellectual deficits in pre-school, school-aged and adult individuals during 1978. —J. Raloff

DOE dismantlement: reasons challenged

Since President Reagan announced his formal intent to abolish the Energy Department last September (SN: 10/3/81, p. 212), Congress had tended to sit quietly and wait for details. No longer. Congressional leaders have begun this month to question the rationale behind Reagan's claim that DOE is no longer necessary, that its duties could be more efficiently carried out by other agencies, and that dispersing its activities would save money.

A hearing by House Energy Committee Chairman John Dingell (D-Mich.) on Feb. 18 examined the cost issue. "Unless re-shuffling energy programs will result in demonstrable savings to taxpayers and will increase the effectiveness of energy policy, we should reject it," Dingell said. A Feb. 2 Congressional Budget Office memo notes that important savings are not expected from dismantlement. "Any large savings are due to policy changes as reflected in the budget," it says, "not to reorganization." Witnesses at the Dingell hearing also discounted measurable cost savings from the move, owing to extra coordination that will be required when energy activities are dispersed throughout government.

Reagan has pointed to stable oil prices and a lack of serious oil-supply disruptions as signs that the energy crisis is over. This had been posited as one reason for disbanding DOE. But Alan Dean compares this to "doing away with the Department of Defense after a couple years of detente." The former coordinator of Richard Nixon's executive-reorganization program added in testimony before the House Energy Subcommittee on Oversight last week that anyone advocating DOE's abolition "should be required to show how burdening the Commerce Department with a large number of programs not closely related to its central mission and fragmenting responsibility for energy within the Executive Branch will benefit the people." □