

For Immediate Release – August 26, 2009

Contacts: Jeff Gearhart, Ecology Center, (734) 761-3186 ext. 117
Oliver Bernstein, Sierra Club, (512) 477-2152

Environmental Protection Agency Moves to Ban Sale of Toxic Lead Tire Balancing Weights for Cars

Washington, DC – In a decision issued today, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reversed its 2005 decision and accepted a petition from a dozen environmental and public health organizations to immediately begin rulemaking to ban lead wheel balancing weights. Lead in wheel weights represents one of the largest unregulated uses of lead in consumer products today. These wheel weights are used to balance vehicle tires so they don't vibrate as they spin. In a separate action today, EPA reached a settlement of a lawsuit to fix a flawed rulemaking to deal with the largest source of lead poisoning – lead in paint from renovation, repair and painting activities.

Lead weights falling off car tire rims is one of the largest ongoing releases of lead into the environment. "1.6 million pounds of lead from wheel weights is left falling off of cars each year where anyone can find and possibly ingest it," said Jeff Gearhart, Research Director for the Ecology Center. "Banning lead wheel weights will greatly protect kids from lead poisoning."

Currently, there is an estimated 12.5 million pounds of lead left uncontrolled in the environment. "Cars and trucks grind the wheel weights into a powder that spreads into the neighborhoods along our busy streets, especially the city streets where traffic is heaviest and the stops, starts, and bumps are more common," said Tom Neltner, Co-Chair of the National Toxics Committee for the Sierra Club. "EPA's action makes it clear that the agency recognizes that once released into our neighborhoods, lead is tough to cleanup. Pollution prevention is the best way to protect our health and our environment."

Today's decision follows several state actions. The state of Washington passed a ban in 2009 which will go into effect in 2011. Maine passed a ban which will go into effect in 2010. California and Iowa are currently considering similar bans. Vermont has banned lead wheel weights for state-owned vehicles by 2010 and for all new vehicles by 2011.

In 2005 the Ecology Center petitioned EPA on the same matter, asking the agency to prohibit the manufacturing, processing, distribution in commerce, use and improper disposal of lead wheel balancing weights. EPA denied that petition on August 8, 2005. Now four years after denying children the opportunity to dramatically reduce their exposure to a major source of new lead on their streets and in their neighborhoods, the EPA is taking action.

While EPA launched a voluntary program working with industry nearly a year ago to address concerns about lead wheel weights, the coalition groups believe that a mandatory phase-out of lead weights is needed to protect children, the public and the environment. New vehicles are now lead-free, but the groups' petition sought to eliminate lead wheel weights from use in aftermarket tires, which are believed to account for about 80% of all wheel weights used.

The coalition groups are: Ecology Center, Sierra Club, Alliance for Healthy Homes, Center for Environmental Health, Environmental Health Watch, Coalition to End Childhood Lead Poisoning, United Parents Against Lead, Louisiana ACORN. For more information, visit <http://www.leadfreewheels.org/>