

Editorials

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Getting the lead out of Minnesota

Getting lead out of our environment has been a slow, painstaking process. Leaded paint, once ubiquitous, was banned in 1978 after mounting evidence showed that flaking chips were poisoning children and harming the environment.

Leaded gasoline, introduced in the early '20s, wasn't completely phased out until 1995, though the harm from lead fumes had been known for decades.

*** Now Minnesota is being petitioned by environmental groups to ban the use of lead ammunition and fishing tackle. It should do so.** This state has tried for years to rely on educational efforts to persuade hunters and anglers to use lead-free alternatives. Regrettably, the voluntary approach has yielded scant results. Leaded ammunition and fishing tackle continue to be sold and used widely across the state, in part because they remain less costly than the lead-free alternatives.

Many things pose levels of risk to the environment. But lead stands out for its high degree of toxicity and, worse, its cumulative effect. Once ingested, it travels to the brain, liver, kidney and bones. Pregnant women with lead in their bones will release it into the bloodstream of the developing fetus. Lead is particularly harmful to young children and even at lower levels can affect IQ. Lead is so poisonous that, according to the World Health Organization, there is no known level of exposure that is considered harmless.

Toxic bullets and fishing tackle harm the environment and humans. It's time to go lead-free.

The use of lead ammunition for waterfowl is already banned in Minnesota, and has been banned on federal wetlands for years. But it remains legal in the state for hunting other birds, small game or deer, and use of lead fishing tackle is not regulated.

Minnesota's state bird, the beloved loon, has proved particularly susceptible to lead's harmful effects. In New Hampshire, the Loon Preservation Committee found that over the last several decades, more than 40% of documented loon deaths in that state were from lead fishing tackle. Even the tiny split-shot lead sinkers used by anglers contain enough lead to kill a loon within several hours of ingestion.

New Hampshire officials responded by banning lead tackle, but smartly, also helped anglers with a buyback program. Those who turned in their lead tackle got hefty discounts on updated, lead-free gear. Last year, 4,500 pieces of lead tackle were turned in. Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New York and Washington state all regulate the use of lead fishing tackle.

Minnesota is home to the largest common loon population in the continental United States and must do more to protect this priceless resource, and we're sure any angler who's heard the haunting tremolo call of a loon across a lake on an early morning outing will agree.

Lead-free ammunition is, admittedly, a tougher hurdle. There remains disagreement over whether it can replicate the overall performance and knock-down power of old-fashioned lead bullets. But lead-free ammo is improving all the time, and hunters may find it worthwhile to eliminate lead from the game they may be feeding family and friends, as well as themselves.

The North Dakota health department, as far back as 2008, joined with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for a study that showed a definitive link between eating wild game shot with lead bullets and higher blood lead levels. Lead ammunition shatters into fragments far from the original wound, and into microscopic pieces that escape detection.

The Governor's Pheasant Opener that kicked off in Austin this weekend seems like a good time to urge Gov. Tim Walz, legislators and hunters alike to strongly consider the benefits of requiring a switch to lead-free. Pheasants Forever offers a detailed viewpoint from experienced hunters who've made the switch.

Go ahead, take your limit (remember, it's two per day per hunter). Cook it. Serve it under glass if you like. Just hold the lead.