

Lost in the fine print

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is proposing significantly tighter air pollution standards for lead - the first update in 30 years. It's long overdue.

But in announcing the new rule, the Bush administration ignored recommendations from independent scientific advisers who had called for even greater protections. The administration also signaled changes that could limit future tightening of the airborne lead standard.

Sound like legalistic mumbo-jumbo? It is, but it has serious implications for kids in Jefferson County and elsewhere in Missouri's lead belt. So serious, in fact, that it's worth taking a minute to wade through the confusing science and regulatory jargon to zero in on the potential danger.

Lead is a potent neurotoxin linked to brain damage and behavioral problems. Kids in certain parts of Missouri - unlike children in more than 99 percent of the rest of the nation - still may wind up being exposed to significant amounts of airborne lead.

Lead in the air stopped being a problem in most of the country years ago when lead was phased out of gasoline. These days, the most common way for children to get lead poisoning is by getting it on their hands and then putting those hands in their mouths.

In 2005, a federal court judge ordered the EPA to update air pollution standards for lead. He acted after a suit filed by the Missouri Coalition for the Environment and a Herculaneum, Mo., couple, Jack and Leslie Warren. They were concerned about kids living around the Doe Run Company's giant Herculaneum smelter.

An independent panel called the Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee reviewed available evidence and recommended a new standard. It called for a level of between 0.1 and 0.2 micrograms of lead per cubic meter of air. The current standard is 1.5 micrograms of lead per cubic meter of air.

Last week, the EPA said it would drop the level to between 0.3 and 0.1 micrograms. It must finalize the rule by Sept. 15.

The advisory panel also recommended changing the frequency of sample collection. Under the existing standard, readings are averaged over three months; the panel asked that they be averaged over one month. The EPA refused.

That's not the first time the Bush administration's EPA officials have ignored the advice of pollution experts. Last year, the EPA briefly considered dropping all air pollution regulations on lead.

This week, the administration finalized a rule on repairing and remodeling homes with lead paint. That's another significant source of lead poisoning in children. The EPA's scientific advisers urged it to toughen the existing law.

Children are considered poisoned when lead levels in their blood reach 10 micrograms per decaliter (10 liters). Years ago, that was the smallest amount that could be reliably detected.

Not any more. A host of new scientific evidence has shown that children can be damaged by much lower levels of lead. Regulators should have taken that new evidence into account when writing rules for renovating homes with lead paint, but the Bush administration refused to do it - even though it acknowledged the new research.

Now, the EPA is suggesting that the risk of airborne lead never can be eliminated. That could trigger changes that would require new rules to be based on cost efficiency rather than the damage lead is doing to children.

That might sound like no big deal to a market economist, but it would be a very big deal for hundreds of children who live around lead smelters in Jefferson and Iron counties. The value of their lives can't be measured in dollars and cents.

Americans must not allow their futures to be lost in legalistic fine print. Congress must demand that EPA regulations meet one simple standard: Do they protect our children? The EPA's current proposal doesn't meet that standard.

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