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AUTOS

## Lead wheel weights to be phased out in California by end of 2009

Chrysler and three lead wheel weight makers agree to the phaseout in a settlement of a suit brought by an environmental group, which contended

the car parts threatened drinking water.

By Martin Zimmerman, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer  
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Lead wheel weights, widely used to balance vehicle tires but considered a threat to drinking water, will be phased out in California by the end of next year under a court settlement approved Wednesday.

The settlement ends a lawsuit filed in May by the Oakland-based Center for Environmental Health against Chrysler and the three largest makers of lead wheel weights for the U.S. market. Some observers see the settlement as a first step toward a broader ban on the products.

In its suit, the group contended that wheel weights falling off vehicles release 500,000 pounds of lead each year into the environment in California. Lost wheel weights are ground down by passing vehicles and the lead can find its way into drinking water supplies, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. They also end up in landfills, where the lead can leach into groundwater.

"Wheel weights have been identified as the largest new route of lead releases into the environment," said Michael Green, executive director of the Center for Environmental Health. "By moving the industry away from leaded wheel weights, we are helping to keep the lead out of our kids' drinking water."

Lead is a highly toxic metal that can cause brain damage and other nervous-system disorders, especially in young children. It has been used to make wheel weights for decades because it is cheap and heavy, allowing mechanics to use relatively small weights when balancing tires. (Unbalanced tires can wear unevenly and pose a safety hazard.)

Under the settlement, approved by Alameda County Superior Court Judge Barbara Miller, Chrysler will end the use of factory-installed lead wheel weights in vehicles sold in California by July 31, 2009. In addition, wheel-weight producer Plombco Inc. of Canada will end shipments of lead wheel weights to California by the end of this year. Producers Perfect Equipment Inc. and

Hennessey Industries, both based in LaVergne, Tenn., will stop shipments to California by the end of 2009.

"We are pleased that the court has approved settlement of this matter so that we can move forward with our aggressive plans to eliminate the use of lead wheel weights in our products," a Chrysler spokesman said. "By the end of this month, we expect that all of the vehicles we produce will be equipped with wheel weights made from alternate materials -- 11 months ahead of the schedule set in the settlement agreement in California."

Lead wheel weights have been under attack for several years by environmentalists. They were banned by the European Union in 2005 and are being phased out in Japan and South Korea. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is sponsoring a voluntary initiative to reduce the use of lead wheel weights but has not banned them.

Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co. and other big tire makers are phasing them out, as are all the major automakers.

"For environmental reasons, this is the direction the industry is going," said a spokesman for Goodyear, which has 83 company-owned tire stores in California.

As lead weights are phased out, weights made of steel or zinc alloy are being used for tire balancing. Those weights are larger and cost 20% to 30% more, said Mark Aiken, vice president of sales for Plombco. However, because wheel weights typically cost less than 50 cents each and there are generally only two per wheel, the higher cost shouldn't have a big effect on consumers, he said.

The Ecology Center, a nonprofit environmental group based in Ann Arbor, Mich., said the California settlement should provide a big boost to the anti-lead forces.

"We fully expect dozens of states to follow California's leadership and ban the use of lead wheel weights," said Jeff Gearheart, the center's research director.

The California lawsuit was filed under Proposition 65, known as the Safe Drinking Water and Toxic Enforcement Act. The law requires the posting of public warnings in businesses or on products that could expose people to chemicals that government scientists have found cause cancer or birth defects.

[martin.zimmerman@latimes.com](mailto:martin.zimmerman@latimes.com)