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Anglers angered over possible ban on lead weights, lures

By Peter Fimrite Updated 8:16 am, Friday, October 24, 2014

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Leonid Presler of San Francisco checks on a small fish he caught while fishing off Torpedo Wharf at Crissy Field on Oct. 22, 2014.

Anglers threw down their waders in anger this week over a decision by a state agency to look into regulating and possibly banning lead sinkers and other fishing gear as part of a comprehensive probe of toxic household products.

The Department of Toxic Substances Control, which is part of the state Environmental Protection Agency, is conducting a three-year investigation into toxic substances used in a variety of common items, including lures, weights and other fishing gear that contain lead, zinc or copper.

The department's draft plan calls for a study of toxic substances in personal care products, building and household furnishings, paints, sealants and flooring, cleaning products, clothing, office machinery and fishing gear.

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The sportfishing industry, conscious of previous efforts to ban the lead weights commonly used by anglers, submitted more than 1,300 comments opposing the proposed investigation during the four-week public comment period, which ended Tuesday.

"They could end up requiring products to be made differently or banned," said Marko Mlikotin, executive director of the California Sportfishing League, who characterized the study as costly, unnecessary and counterproductive. "There are no alternatives for certain fishing products, like lead sinkers."

The bigger goal

The work plan, which was released Sept. 12, is part of the Safer Consumer Products

Program of the California Green Chemistry Initiative, which is an attempt by the state to "accelerate the quest for safer products."

Karl Palmer, the chief of the safer products program for the department, said the idea is to encourage manufacturers to look at the additives, coatings and chemicals in their products over the next three years and, if possible, help regulators come up with ways to make them safer.

"The work plan is just the beginning of the dialogue on these things," Palmer said. "In the long run, there is a possibility that some specific product might be banned, but it's one of a variety of potential end points. What we want is to make things better by design."

Fishing tackle is a natural target, according to environmentalists, because the hooks, lines and sinkers often end up being left behind by anglers. Lead weights and sinkers — which are attached to the lines through loops, with pliers or, in some cases, squeezed on by a fisherman's teeth — commonly come loose and fall off or get snagged in the lakes, streams and rivers where anglers congregate.

Past scrutiny

It is not the first time lead sinkers have come under scrutiny. The Center for Biological Diversity petitioned the U.S. EPA in 2011 to regulate lead fishing tackle, but the petition was denied.

Lead poisoning of birds nevertheless is a well-documented problem, according to Palmer and others. Birds sometimes mistake the lead weights dropped while fishing for tasty snails, and waterfowl sometimes scoop them up with the pebbles they ingest to help digest their food. The acid in a bird's stomach or gizzard dissolves the lead, which then enters the ill-fated avian's bloodstream.

It is for this reason and the widespread poisoning of California condors that the California Legislature agreed last year to ban lead pellets and slugs in ammunition by 2019.

Palmer said there are, in fact, alternatives to lead, including tungsten, steel and various alloys. A ban on lead fishing tackle apparently worked at Quarry Lakes, a former industrial site in Fremont, where the Alameda County Water District allows anglers to trade in their lead weights and sinkers for steel equivalents. Staffers have collected more than 1,000 pounds of lead, which they sell to metal recyclers, over the past decade. The proceeds are used to buy more steel tackle to swap.

Mlikotin argued that there has been no independent scientific analysis showing lead weights have been a problem. And, he said, the contemplated regulations would harm an industry that contributes $4.9 billion a year to the California economy.

"It just doesn't make sense that the state views anglers as a threat to the environment when there is no science to support that," said Mlikotin, who, with other fishing groups, the California Chamber of Commerce, California Travel Association and the National Federation of Independent Business is demanding that fishing equipment be removed from the work plan.

Palmer said he is happy fishing groups are speaking out and hopes the dialogue will inspire them to come up with better fishing gear and tackle.

"Fundamentally, this is asking the designers to build a better mousetrap, if you will," he said. "We're not trying to stick our hands in the tackle box. We just want them to look at alternatives. Hopefully in the end we will have a safer environment and still be able to catch fish."

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The hunt for toxic substances

The Department of Toxic Substances Control issued its Priority Product Work Plan in September including seven product categories that will be studied over the next three years to determine whether there is a way to improve household safety. The items and goods in the selected categories have been identified in the past as having harmful chemicals or potentially toxic components. They include:

Beauty, personal care and hygiene products: This includes soaps, deodorants, lip balms and gloss, lotions, ointments, cosmetics, and hair and nail care products.

Building products: This includes paints, adhesives, sealants, caulking material, flooring, carpeting and roof coatings.

Furniture and furnishings: This includes bedding, fabrics and furniture treated with flame retardants, stain-resistant chemicals or both.

Cleaning products: This includes air fresheners, waxes, spot removers, floor, window, and bathroom and oven cleaners.

Clothing: This includes sportswear, sleepwear, underwear and everyday clothing that contains dyes, flame retardants or other chemicals.

Fishing and angling equipment: This includes weights, tackle and gear that contain lead, zinc or copper.

Office machinery: This includes printer inks, toner cartridges and specialty paper.