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New Study Finds Lead Levels in a Majority of Paints Exceed Chinese Regulation and Should Not be on Store Shelves

(Beijing, China) A new study on lead in decorative paints sold in China released today by Insight Explorer and IPEN finds that more than half of the paints analyzed exceed Chinese lead regulations. Moreover, even when paint brands offer paint with lower levels of lead, consumers have no way of knowing it because very few of 141 paint cans analyzed in the study carried information about lead content on the label.

“The health impacts of lead exposure on young children’s brains are lifelong, irreversible and untreatable,” said Pan Qingan, Project Director of China Heavy Metal Pollution Map. “We are limiting our children and our nation’s future intellectual development even though safe and effective alternatives are already in use and widely available in China. We must reduce this critical source of lead exposure to young children.”

“Chinese children’s blood levels showed significant decrease after leaded gasoline was banned. Therefore, the continued use of lead paint will become the primary source of childhood lead exposure,” said Zhang Jingling, Chinese Research Academy of Environmental Sciences. “First, children will absorb the extra lead through the gastrointestinal tract by chewing on objects such as toys, household furniture or other articles painted with lead paint. Second, exposure to dust or soil contaminated with lead-based paint is exacerbated by children’s normal hand-to-mouth behavior. We must enforce existing government regulations on the use of lead in paint in order to minimize childhood lead exposure and safeguard their health.”

Regulation limiting the amount of lead in paint for interior and decorative use was introduced in China in 2001, complementing the Toy Safety standard introduced in 1986 for lead in paint on children’s toys. Both regulations limit the lead content of paint to 90 ppm of soluble lead, i.e., the amount of lead that can be extracted by a standard acid treatment to simulate the amount of lead bioavailable for absorption when e.g., a toy painted with lead paint is put in the mouth. Laws or regulations to control the lead content of decorative paints—paints used on the interiors and exteriors of homes, schools, and other child-occupied facilities—are common in most highly industrialized countries.

In late 2014, Insight Explorer purchased a total of 141 cans of solvent-based, enamel decorative paints representing 47 brands from stores in eight cities in China (Beijing, Shenyang, Zhengzhou, Nanchang, Guangzhou, Xiamen, Shanghai and Kunming). Samples from these paints were analyzed by an accredited laboratory in Italy for total lead content.

Key findings from the report, *Lead in Enamel Decorative Paints in China*, include:

- Approximately half of the paints analyzed for this study exceed Chinese lead regulations and should not be on store shelves. Of the 141 paints analyzed, 70 of the paints (50% of paints) contained a total lead content above 600 ppm. A 600 ppm total lead content approximately corresponds to 90 ppm soluble lead, the lead limit for lead in paint in China.
- More than one-third (48 paints; 34% of paints) of the paints contained dangerously high lead levels above 10,000 ppm total lead and would not be allowed for sale in any country restricting the use of lead in decorative paint.
- One or more paints from 42 of the 47 brands (89% of brands) had a total lead content below 600 ppm (approximately 90 ppm soluble lead), showing that the technology exists in China to produce paint within the regulatory limit.
- Approximately one-third of the paints had lead levels below 90 ppm – the regulatory standard for total lead content in many countries, indicating that these companies can produce products that are safer for Chinese consumers and meet quality standards for export.
- Yellow paints had the highest lead levels and red paints had the second highest lead levels.
- Consumers rarely know whether or not paint meets Chinese regulation because very few of paint cans analyzed carried information about lead content on the label.

The World Health Organization (WHO) calls lead paint “a major flashpoint” for children’s potential lead poisoning and says that “since the phase-out of leaded petrol, lead paint is one of the largest sources of exposure to lead in children.” Children are exposed to lead when painted surfaces deteriorate over time and contaminate household dust and soils. Children ages 0-6, engaging in normal hand-to-mouth behaviors, are most at risk of damage to their intelligence and mental development from exposure to lead dust and soil.

China is the world’s second largest producer and consumer of coatings and there may be as many as 8,000 paint producers inside China, according to the coatings industry magazine, *Coatings World*. In addition, the Chinese paint market saw a rapid increase in sales and demand during the past decade. Though the demand for paint for newly constructed buildings has recently started to decrease with the slowing of the real estate market, demand for paint to repaint existing buildings and homes is increasing.

Two previous paint studies were conducted in China in 2009 with a total of 122 paints analyzed. Although the earlier studies included fewer brands, the percentage of samples with total lead concentrations greater than 600 ppm and 10,000 ppm are similar among the three studies. Most of these samples were from brands not included in the current study.

Key recommendations made in the report include:

- **Government:** Establish effective procedures for monitoring and enforcing full compliance with existing regulatory controls on the lead content of paints manufactured and sold in China; move toward a total lead regulatory standard to ease burdens on companies and facilitate regulation.
- **Industry:** Discontinue using lead-based pigments and lead-based drying catalysts as paint ingredients and provide information on product labels indicating the lead content of paint.
- **Consumers:** Ask about the lead content of paints and only purchase paints meeting national regulations.

The paint study was undertaken as part of the Asian Lead Paint Elimination Project (2012 - 2015), funded by the European Union with 1.4 million euros. It was implemented by IPEN, a network of 700 NGOs in more than 100 countries working for a toxics-free future.

Insight Explorer (IE) is an environmental NGO established in 2012 in Beijing. It seeks to increase public awareness and citizens' capacity to take action in the areas of pollution control, ecosystem and biodiversity conservation, and sound environmental governance. In September 2013, it launched a project called China Heavy Metal Pollution Map, which focuses on both pollution hotspots and problematic consumer products caused by heavy metals.

IPEN is an international NGO network comprised of 700 organizations in 116 countries that work to reduce and eliminate hazardous, toxic substances internationally and within their own countries. (www.ipen.org)

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