

## Fishermen defend lead sinkers against proposed ban; activists say they harm wildlife

BY RICHARD DEGENER / STAFF WRITER

LOWER TOWNSHIP — Bob Lubberman figures he's cleaned about 20,000 fish for customers over the past 20 years here at the Miss Chris Fishing Center and he's never found a lead sinker in any of them.

That's why Lubberman is against a proposal by a coalition of environmental groups to ban the use of lead in fishing tackle. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is considering such a ban. Environmentalists - following a successful push to ban lead ammunition used in waterfowl hunting in the 1990s — say a ban on lead tackle is needed to further protect wildlife.

The proposal doesn't sit well with southern New Jersey anglers, who face an increasing number of regulations on fish sizes and safety gear, as well as more stringent licensing and mandates.

Lubberman said the proposed ban would increase the cost of fishing since lead substitutes would be more expensive. And since lead is denser than the proposed substitutes, fishing tackle might have to change as well to accommodate larger sinkers, Lubberman said.

"There's lead going into the water but it doesn't seem to be hurting anything. I've never found any lead in a fish stomach," Lubberman said.

According to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service data, the recreational fishing industry in New Jersey includes 500,000 anglers who contributed \$644 million to the state's economy in 2006. Garden State anglers also paid \$100 million in state taxes and \$140 million in federal taxes in 2006.

If the proposal goes through, Lubberman said, whatever substitutes are used for lead will cost more and be less effective. They may even get caught up more on underwater snags. He doesn't like the direction things are going.

"Eventually they'll ban fishing or any form of fun," Lubberman said.

The Center for Biological Diversity joined with the American Bird Conservancy on Aug. 3 to petition for a ban on lead fishing gear and hunting ammunition.

Since then, 66 environmental and conservation groups have signed on. Jeff Miller of the Center for Biological Diversity said lead shot was banned nationally in 1991



Common Loon, in non-breeding plumage, struggling to free itself from fishing line with attached lead sinker. Sinker is on its breast, indicated by arrow. The loon probably swallowed a fish with attached broken fishing tackle. (Photo by Latafat Correa).

for waterfowl hunting and that it is time to expand the prohibition. Miller said a lot of birds including swans, loons, snow geese and brown pelicans are ingesting lead sinkers.

Miller acknowledged the problem is mainly in freshwater areas and mostly involves the smallest lead sinkers. Studies show few birds swallow sinkers bigger than 2 ounces, though a 2.75-ounce pyramid sinker was once found in a common loon.

"There are at least 10 substitutes for lead including ceramics, glass, stainless steel, bismuth, tungsten, and brass. It probably would be more expensive but in 1994 EPA looked at the economic impact and found a less than \$4 a year cost for the average angler for the smaller sinkers less than 1 inch," Miller said.

But the proposed ban would include larger sinkers often used by saltwater anglers. There is also some lead in buck-tails, jigs (lead-weighted hooks), lures, spinners, weighted fly-fishing line and even some components in reels.

Richard Orth, owner of Cape May Bait & Tackle in West Cape May, said a lead ban would at least double fishing-tackle costs. He sells lead sinkers for 25 cents an ounce. Lead is a cheap metal and easily can be melted by those who want to make their own sinkers.

"It's the cheapest metal, and this would probably bring the prices way up," Orth said.

The Galloway Township-based Recreational Fishing Alliance is advising anglers to write the EPA. The group argues alternative materials will increase the costs by at least six times and possibly as much as 15 times.

RFA Executive Director Jim Donofrio said studies show that fewer than 1 percent of waterfowl are killed by lead sinker ingestion so a ban would have a negligible impact. Donofrio said the industry would be willing to work with manufacturers to commit to a gradual lead reduction, but he said the lack of alternatives and questionable science does not support an immediate ban.

“Overarching restrictions like these need to be based on sound science, not ideological rhetoric. It’s simply more anti-fishing, anti-fishermen, doomsday protectionism in the name of loons and loony extremists,” Donofrio said.

Miller, however, said the 3,000 tons of lead lost each year from guns and the 4,000 tons from fishing gear is poisoning at least 75 different species of birds. He said lead poses a risk to humans who eat wildlife.

The group’s petition cites a number of studies including one showing 50 percent of adult common loons in the Northeastern U.S. are killed by lead from fishing sinkers and jigs.

“50 percent, that’s a stunning figure,” said Robert Johns of the American Bird Conservancy.

Johns said waterfowl hunters in 1991 said the ban on lead shot would destroy the industry, but since then it has increased by 30 percent.

“It didn’t cripple waterfowl activity. Is it more expensive? Yes it is,” Johns said. He said if more hunters used other types of ammunition, the increased volume could lower prices.

Some saltwater anglers feel they are being unfairly

included in a problem that’s mostly in freshwater areas, where fishermen use smaller sinkers that can look like seeds and can be ingested by birds. Some birds swallow small stones and grit to aid in grinding up their food, and can mistake lead pellets for stones.

Local fishermen haven’t seen any evidence of this in saltwater areas.

“Find me a duck with an 8-ounce sinker in it,” said Richard Tees, a worker at Jim’s Bait & Tackle on Schellengers Landing. “I was a commercial fisherman for 36 years and I never saw a clam or any kind of fish with lead in it.”

Charlie Kennedy, an angler from the Villas section, agreed with making waterfowl hunters change to steel shot because the lead was fired in wetlands where “ducks feed on the bottom.” Kennedy said 98 percent of lead sinkers lost by anglers are on deepwater wrecks and structures where they pose no threat.

“Lead won’t leach into the water and get into the fish,” Kennedy said.

Miller said the EPA is expected to make a decision on whether to move forward with a ban on fishing gear Nov. 1. There would be a formal proposal that would be open for public comment. Johns said that would be the time to lobby for changes, such as a phase-in period or more lenient rules for saltwater fishing.

Following comments from the hunting lobby, including the National Rifle Association, the EPA is trying to drop the proposal to expand the ban to all lead ammunition. It says it does not have the authority to issue such a ban. Miller said the EPA does have the authority and his organization is pressing the agency to act.