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Copper in brake pads out to protect water, fish

BY MICHAEL GARDNER

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED AUGUST 28, 2010 AT NOON, UPDATED AUGUST 28, 2010 AT 7:06 P.M.

A ground-breaking compromise to greatly reduce the amount of copper used in vehicle brake pads has been reached — a welcome relief to San Diego regional water-quality officials staring at the threat of heavy fines for having elevated levels of the toxic material washing into watersheds and bays.

Every time motorists apply their brakes trace amounts of copper dust settle on roads and parking lots. Rain then carries the particles into waterways, threatening drinking water and marine life.

The Legislature in the next few days is expected to approve the complex deal, detailed in a bill carried by Sen. Christine Kehoe, D-San Diego. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has not taken a position, but manufacturers, environmental groups and water-quality officials behind the compromise are lobbying for his signature.

Three years in the making, Senate Bill 346 sets limits on the amount of copper in brake pads, starting in 2021. By 2025, there would be a virtual ban on copper's use.

The measure also would place tight caps on other materials in the pads, including lead, mercury, chromium and cadmium. Those would be effective in 2014.

But copper, which helps prevent brakes from overheating and control shuddering, is the most prevalent product.

The brake industry had been resistant, partly over concerns that alternatives could be too costly and may not meet federal safety standards.

Subsequently, automobile makers and manufacturers secured amendments to extend deadlines and compliance waivers should alternatives fail to materialize.

Industry representatives, in a letter of support, call the measure "a balanced solution" that "provides adequate time and procedural safeguards."

Kehoe said motorists will still be able to find replacement pads, under special provisions negotiated in the legislation.

"I don't think any car will be pulled off the road because of this bill," Kehoe said. Cost had been a concern. Anne Wilson, a spokeswoman for the Motor and Equipment Manufacturers Association, signaled confidence that prices will not spike.

"With sufficient time to develop alternative brake products the industry anticipates that it will still be able to deliver a wide range of safe and affordable brake products," she said in an e-mail message.

The measure was sponsored by the city of San Diego, which is under threat of fines once new water-quality standards are imposed in the coming years. Treatment facilities to scrub water of copper and other compounds would be too expensive, they say.

"If you can reduce pollution at its source, you're going to spend less money and have a broader impact and have a greater chance of success," said Bill Harris of the San Diego Storm Water Department.

The region is already under orders by state pollution regulators to reduce dissolved copper in the Chollas Creek watershed by 62 percent in the next eight years and even more over the next two decades. Fifty-percent of its pollution can be traced to copper dust, officials say.

The city anticipates similar regulations for each of its watersheds in the future.

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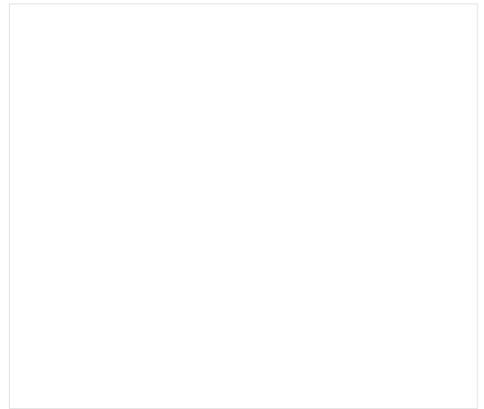
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