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New state law reduces copper in brake pads

Jessica Kwong, Chronicle Staff Writer
Tuesday, October 5, 2010

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Legislators have given a red light to vehicle
brake pads containing copper, a chemical
harmful to salmon and other aquatic life.

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After a 15-year fight that surfaced with
concerns about the [San Francisco](#) Bay, Gov.
[Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) signed SB346, which

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requires brake pad manufacturers to reduce the use of copper to no more than
5 percent by 2021 and no more than 0.5 percent by 2025.

It's a major feat considering the stakeholders - environmental groups, carmakers, brake
manufacturers and government officials, said Ashley Boren, the executive director of
Sustainable Conservation.

"It was much better for the diverse interests to work together to find a solution instead
of potentially have this go into litigation," she said. "No one loves the bill, but they can
live with the bill."

The effort began in 1996 when [Bay Area](#) cities suspected that copper from brake pads
was polluting water. Even small amounts of copper can confuse a salmon's sense of
smell and make it unable to find its spawning ground, scientists say.

Sustainable Conservation brought together environmental groups, brake manufacturers
and storm water agencies to form the Brake Pad Partnership. Using South San Francisco
as a case study, the partnership found that brakes account for up to 60 percent of
copper in California's watershed run-off.

Tiny amounts of copper fall onto the streets every time drivers step on their brakes.

San Francisco does not typically contribute to copper concentrations in the bay because
it is the only California coastal city with a sewer system that treats not only sanitary
waste but street runoff, said Tyrone Jue, a spokesman for the San Francisco Public
Utilities Commission.

However, he said, treatment systems can send pollutants into the bay if they are
overloaded.

Many members of the auto industry were against an earlier version of the bill that
required them to pay for copper cleanup efforts that would have run in the billions, said
Curt Augustine, director of policy and government affairs for the Alliance of Automobile
Manufacturers. Companies came out in favor of the bill after that part was removed.

"We were able to successfully develop a piece of legislation that balanced environmental
and motorist safety needs," Augustine said.

Brake manufacturers also opposed the bill when it was first introduced in February

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2009 because there isn't a direct substitute for copper.

Manufacturers, though, became more receptive when they were given until 2025 to come up with new formulas, said Bob Peters, chief engineer for Akebono Brake Corp., which supplies brake pads to Chevrolet, Ford and [General Motors](#).

Washington is the only other state that has passed comparable legislation. [New York](#) and [Rhode Island](#) have introduced similar bills and Oregon is looking to follow, Boren said.

E-mail Jessica Kwong at jkwong@sfgate.com.

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