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Lead free
 legislation is a
 game changer

U.S. strives to become "Land of the Lead free"

Lead free legislation is a game-changer

“Converting from standard brass to lead free plumbing components is kind of like an old man who needs to ease into a hot tub,” said Darrell Read, operations manager at wholesaler F. W. Webb’s Williston, Vt., branch, New England’s largest plumbing and heating, cooling and industrial supplies distributor, with more than 70 locations in New England and New York. “Here, in a state most immediately affected by the legislation, we recognize the need to make changes and to provide the new lead free products quickly, but we also recognized the need to be deliberate about it,” added Read.

By now, contractor demand for lead free plumbing components in California and Vermont, the first two states to pass their own lead free plumbing laws, is an ongoing need with no turning back. During the next year and a half, wholesalers and contractors in all other states will need to comply. Read’s advice: “Ease your way into it. Sell or install all of the standard products now while you can and, as inventory is reduced, replenish supplies with the new lead free technology.”

Last month Watts Water Technologies conducted a random survey of 16 wholesalers and contractors in Vermont and California. They found that wholesalers were generally eager to talk about the impact of lead free technology and that their contractor customers, as a



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whole, were receptive to the change.

The key variable they found, however, was the way manufacturers responded to the need to retool their products and how effectively they introduced wholesalers to the new products. Watts Water managers were delighted to learn from wholesalers and contractors that they (Watts Water) handled the transition well.

There are many facets and some challenges to the seismic shift to lead free plumbing components. As a leading producer of lead free products and technology, the brands of Watts Water have also made a commitment to being an information leader as well. Learn more at

www.WeAreLeadFree.net.

In the opinion of contractors

Minnesota Master Plumber Eric Aune, president of Zimmerman, Minn.-based Aune Plumbing, says that he’s gradually making preparations for the switch to lead free plumbing components. “I’d like to be ahead of the curve, not behind it,” said Aune.

“Typically, I’m not real fond of federally-mandated changes, but this one has consumer safety at the core, so I know I’ll need to remind myself of that occasionally,” added Aune. “A concern of mine is product availability. When lead free goes large scale, the last thing I’ll want to hear when I go to my supplier at Twin Cities Winnelson is that lead free products are unavailable. Knowing that Watts made a proactive commitment to be ahead of the curve and to have the broadest line of lead free products on the market makes a very important statement to me.”

He’s also got a few opinions about the U.S. economy and our responsibility as buying/consuming Americans. “We owe it to our own labor force and manufacturers to buy American,” he said. “The lead free issue is one we’ll all have to deal with, so, as we respond, we can at least help by installing products made here in the U.S.”

One of Read’s contractor customers in Vermont is Kerry White, service manager for Vermont Mechanical



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based in Williston. “My best advice for transitioning to lead free components is to maintain stock and inventory of the lead free ball valves and fittings for heating and plumbing applications. We chose to switch to lead free for everything from the get-go. That way there were no mistakes.”

“It’s impossible to be too well prepared,” added White. “Invariably, suppliers will be limited in their ability to meet the demand for lead free products; short supplies means that both installers and wholesalers will have issues. If you can, stock up on essential components.”

It’s a done deal

In December 2010, politicians and industry experts anticipated new legislation that would make the “Land of the Free” also the “Land of the Lead free,” pending a single but very important signature.

Of course, we now know that in January 2011 President Obama signed the “Reduction of Lead in Drinking Water Act” (or Senate Bill S.3874) which set a new, federal standard for the level of permissible lead in plumbing fixtures that carry water for human consumption. The Land of the Lead free now begins in just 18 months. By 2014, the allowable lead content in products providing water for human consumption will change

After January 4, 2014, every potable plumbing product that does not meet the new federal standard will be illegal and cannot be sold or installed for use with potable water.

from up to eight percent to not more than a weighted average of 0.25 percent of wetted surfaces. The new bill will align allowable lead levels in all 50 states with the earlier adopted, permissible lead levels in California, Vermont and Maryland state legislation.

“In our opinion, the legislation appears sufficiently simple and straightforward. However, if you are in the business of installing, specifying, distributing or manufacturing products to comply with the legislation, there is much more to it than meets the eye,” said Stephanie Ewing, director of strategic partnerships, Watts Water Technologies.

Act, partner, protect

With mandatory, U.S.-wide compliance set for January 2014, it’s now time to grapple with the implications. Watts Water recommends:

1. Distributors, contractors and



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engineers should be proactive. Don’t wait too long to start the transition, because delays may ultimately be costly.

2. Team up with quality manufacturers. The new law will change both the material and manufacturing process for bronze and brass products used in potable water systems. The change is comprehensive, requiring that manufacturers have ample R&D resources.

3. Protect your business: Fines and lawsuits may be just around the

your business and introduces risks; from your competitors, from product quality issues and possibly from legal and regulatory action. Another facet of the lead free movement is that allowing your competitors to get ahead of you means running the risk of losing your customers and sales.

Invariably, some suppliers and manufacturers will take shortcuts. When this happens, product deficiencies, failures and (Who knows?) lead in lead free metal formulations will only become apparent after purchase and installation. Good advice: Protect your business. Work with reputable suppliers and manufacturers. This will ensure that the products you sell start from the highest quality materials and processes and are able to meet or exceed lead free requirements.

Failure to plan is not an option

You should start your transition soon, and smartly. A good first move: Contact each supplier to confirm that their products are already lead-free compliant; if not, determine whether they have clear plans to transition to a lead-free equivalent in time for your business to keep pace with the legislation.

In most cases, you’ll want to identify and sell off low-volume specialty or seasonal products first. Transitioning to high-volume lead free products will typically occur later in the transition plan.

Watts Water has taken the implications of the federal mandates seriously. They’re focusing R&D resources on the lead free conversion. They have also broken ground on a 30,000+ sq. foot expansion to their Franklin, N.H. foundry. The plant’s

corner for those who don’t abide by the law.

“Lead free is a game changer,” adds Ewing. “Our customers in California, Vermont and Maryland can attest to the impact to their business. We do believe that proper planning and compliance will shape our success or failure for years to come.”

After January 4, 2014, every potable plumbing product that does not meet the new federal standard will be illegal and cannot be sold or installed for use with potable water. Period. States will be required to implement the new lead free requirements through state or local plumbing codes, and some states may also enforce the requirements through consumer protection statutes or other laws. Violators of the federal law may be subject to monetary penalties, government lawsuits or civil lawsuits brought by concerned citizens.

Managing risk

Lead free changes the landscape for

➔ Continued on p 24



The primary options available for materials are lead free brass and bronze, stainless steel and plastics. Each lead free technology has costs beyond the basic raw material to consider.

multi-million dollar expansion is expected to be complete by February 2013 and will focus exclusively on

producing lead free products.

Materials and manufacturing

Selecting lead free materials is not as simple a process as it would seem. There are many options available to manufacturers; each option has its own set of limitations. When complying with the lead free laws, there are many variables to address that cover multiple manufacturing processes, while being mindful of material suitability and product cost.

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“Manufacturers have a responsibility to deliver lead free compliant products that meet customers’ expectations for performance and serviceability. With the various material options that are available to meet the requirements of the lead free statutes, development of a material strategy is critical to maintain performance and deliver

value to the end user,” said Jeff Scilingo, director of R&D engineering for Watts Water Technologies.

How to get started?

For those impacted by the new national lead free legislation, making the transition to lead free products can appear overwhelming at first. “Partnering with a manufacturer who understands the impact of the law and has experience with the challenges of a change of this size is important,” said Bill Tracey, western regional manager for Watts Water.

Ultimately the goal is to offer products that provide safer, cleaner water for families, communities and the future.

One of the best sources of information about current lead free needs here in the U.S. is the website developed by Watts Water Technologies, www.WeAreLeadFree.net. The website offers frequently-updated news about what is happening around the country with lead free legislation and requirements. ●

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