

WHOLESALE[®]

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Change for the Better

U.S. strives to become 'Land of the Lead Free'

Lead free legislation is a game-changer

BY JOHN VASTYAN

Special to THE WHOLESALE

“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 F. W. Webb’s Williston, Vt., branch. Webb is one of the region’s largest plumbing, HVAC and industrial supplies distributors 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 provide the new lead free products – quickly, but we also recognize the need to be deliberate about it,” he added.

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.

So, until January 2014 when the law shifts to all 50 states, wholesalers

and contractors in 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.”

Just 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 contractors, as a whole, were receptive to the change.

The key variable they found, however, was the way manufacturers responded to the need to re-tool 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 prod-

ucts and technology, the brands of Watts Water have also made a commitment to being an information leader as well.

In the opinion of contractors

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 fed-

erally-mandated changes, but this one has consumer safety at the core, so I know I’ll need to remind myself of that occasionally. 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 USA.”

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

chanical 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,” said White. “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. Invariably, suppliers will be limited in their ability to meet the demand for lead free products, and short supplies means that both in-



Kerry White (left), service manager for Vermont Mechanical, says, “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.”

stallers and wholesalers will have issues. If you can, stock up on essential components.”

Ray Ernst with Slakey Brothers – a company that’s grown from a small family-owned company to an employee-owned corporation with twenty four branches and three design center show rooms, serving California, Western Nevada and Southern Oregon – commented, “There were two glaring problems that we faced when switching to lead-free products. One was acquiring the inventory, which was a pretty big issue. The second issue was the sol- (Turn to It’s official... page 2.)

Committed to lead free

This article came together through a collaborative effort that involved several independent wholesalers and Watts Water Technologies experts, including Watts’ Director of Strategic Partnerships Stephanie Ewing. Among the Watts team, Ewing is closest to the wholesalers and how best to prepare them for the federally-mandated changes.

These quotes from Ewing summarize the importance of lead free initiatives by Watts, and many other manufacturers moving toward lead-free product manufacturing and installation:

- “As said by our David Coghlan, Watts Water Technologies CEO and president, on our YouTube lead free video, ‘The organization is fully focused on this key objective.’”

- “The commitment of our leadership is evident, and our whole company has

rallied behind this game-changing initiative. Ernie Elliott, an industry icon for Watts, is leading the charge as our executive vice president of strategic initiatives. His involvement alone is an indication of how important this mandate is to manufacturers.”

- “Our investment in www.wearlead-free.net shows our commitment to ensuring readiness support to our distribution partners and professionals. This site is armed with all the information and tools wholesalers need for their transition to Lead Free on January 4, 2014.”

- “My teammates and I are personally committed and engaged at the awareness level in terms of preparation for the Lead Free movement. It’s a game changer and a dynamic that will dramatically affect all product distribution, nationwide.”

It's official: Lead free is the law

(Continued from page 1.)

der – it doesn't work as well since it's lead-free. On the installation side, there could have been some education provided when the products first came out because a lot of the installers are still pretty old school and they could have been better educated with the new, lead-free products.

"Given the amount of time that everyone had to switch over to lead-free products, too many manufacturers waited 'til the last minute – so the switch didn't go over well," continued Ernst. "We switched to Watts because the company we had been using at the time was having major issues and procrastinated. They weren't prepared. Watts was more prepared, and they were very organized."

It's a done deal

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 from up to 8% to not more than a weighted average of 0.25% of wetted surfaces. The new bill will align allowable lead levels in all 50 states with the earlier adopted, permissible levels in California, Vermont and Maryland.

"In our opinion, the legislation appears sufficiently simple and straight forward. 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.

Risks of legal liability

Many incorrectly believe that manufacturers or suppliers are the only ones at risk when making false claims of a product's lead free compliance. This could not be further from the truth. As with laws from California and Vermont, the national law states,

"products introduced into commerce" must comply with the Reduction of Lead in Drinking Water Act.

Distributors and wholesalers selling products that falsely claim to be lead free or that are of poor quality could be just as liable as a manufacturer or supplier. The law goes on to state that legal action can be brought by any individual, corporation, company, association, municipality, state, or federal agency. Distributors and wholesalers found guilty could face significant monetary penalties.

Act, partner, protect

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

1. Distributors, contractors and engineers should be proactive. Don't wait

"Manufacturers have a responsibility to deliver lead free compliant products that meet the customers' expectations for performance and serviceability."

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 of manufacturers ample R&D resources.

3. Protect your business. Fines and lawsuits may be just around the corner for those who don't abide the law.

"Lead free is a game changer," added 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.

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 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: allowing your competitors to get ahead of you means running the risk of losing your customers and sales.

Some suppliers and manufacturers may take short cuts that could lead to product deficiencies, failures and perhaps even lead in lead free metal formulations that may only become apparent after purchase and installation. Good advice: Protect your business. Work with reputable suppliers and manufacturers to ensure the products you sell start from high-quality materials and processes and will meet or exceed lead free requirements.

Failure to plan – 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 compliant or if 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+ square-foot expansion to their Franklin, N.H., foundry. The plant's multi-million dollar expansion is expected to be complete by Febru-

ary 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, and 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.

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

"Manufacturers have a responsibility to deliver lead free compliant products that meet the 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 on this issue 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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