

UN: Leaded fuel to be gone by 2013

October 28 2011, BY RON DePASQUALE , Associated Press

(AP) -- Leaded gasoline, once so widespread it was sold at U.S. pumps as "regular" fuel, is expected to be eradicated globally within two years, the United Nations Environment Program announced Thursday.

With the end of [leaded gasoline](#) in sight, [public health](#) and environmental advocates are claiming victory in a fight that stretches all the way back to when it was first added to gasoline in the 1920s.

Leaded gasoline is still used in six nations. Afghanistan, Algeria, Iraq, North Korea, Myanmar and Yemen are expected to complete the phase-out by 2013, said the U.N., which is assisting those nations.

The elimination of leaded gasoline has increased IQ scores, lowered lead-in-blood levels by up to 90 percent and prevented the [premature deaths](#) of more than 1.2 million people annually, according to a new study by Thomas Hatfield, chairman of California State University, Northridge's department of environmental and occupational health.

"We live in a time when politicians and lobbyists make sport out of pitting the economy against public health," said Peter Lehner, executive director of the [Natural Resources Defense](#) Council. "This study flies in the face of those petty politics."

In 2002, the NRDC and the U.N. Environmental Program began a final push to eradicate leaded fuel by founding the Partnership for Clean Fuels and Vehicles, which helps developing nations with the switch to [unleaded gasoline](#).

Most of the six nations still using leaded gasoline are only using small amounts, said Jim Sniffen, a U.N. Environment Program spokesman. They are working with the U.N. and partner agencies to conduct [blood testing](#) for lead levels and develop plans to phase out leaded fuel, he said.

Lead became the gasoline additive of choice in the 1920s, after General Motors, DuPont and Standard Oil of New Jersey, the forerunner of Exxon, chose it over clean-burning ethanol and other alternatives as a way to make engines run better. It became universal despite warnings from public health advocates and a scandal over the deaths in 1924 of six refinery workers in Newark, New Jersey, who were poisoned while manufacturing it and "were led away in straitjackets," said Bill Kovarik, a journalist and communication professor at Radford University who researched the history of leaded gasoline.

"Historically, there are only a handful of major environmental victories like this," Kovarik said. "It took 90 years to eradicate what was always a well-known poison from a product that everyone uses. It's a great achievement, but it really says something about how public health works globally, that it took so long ... Benjamin Franklin complained about lead poisoning in print shops."

The industry falsely claimed that there were no alternatives to lead, which was more profitable, and gained control over the government's scientific study of it, Kovarik said.

Eventually, exposure to airborne lead was found to cause brain, kidney and cardiovascular damage. In children, it was found to lower IQ levels and shorten attention spans.

A public health crisis again erupted around lead in the 1960s as the environmental movement bloomed. A lawsuit filed by the NRDC in 1973 led to the Environmental Protection Agency regulating lead in

gasoline and finally banning it as an additive in 1986.

"This is an environmental issue that was rediscovered and it was finally phased out, but it could have been done early on with even the slightest precaution, because everyone knew about lead poisonings," Kovarik said.

"As we look to some future of environmental sanity, this is a great example of where we could have done better. We have to learn from this."

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Citation: UN: Leaded fuel to be gone by 2013 (2011, October 28) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-10-fuel.html>

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