

Outdoors

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Environmental Journal: State adopts EPA rules for lead-safe contractors

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Starting on Monday, new federal rules imposed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will require that any contractor, painter, electrician or other person working on a house or school in Rhode Island built before 1978 must have a special "lead-safe" license from the state Health Department.

The new rules are causing some contractors to scramble to take the one-day course required to obtain the licenses.

But state officials insist they have been enforcing similar regulations since 2001, so there should be very little impact on those remodeling or renovating older homes.

"We've been doing this for nine years and we already have more than 900 firms licensed," said Robert Vanderslice, chief of the Health Department's Lead Poisoning Prevention Program. He said there would be some changes. Larger fines may be imposed on violators, and entire companies can be punished for the wrongdoing of employees.

But most of the standards and requirements have long been followed by the state's contracting community and the Health Department, Vanderslice said.

The reason is the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development recommended similar measures for their properties, and the state embraced those rules in 2001. The EPA back then declined to impose regulations for remodelers.

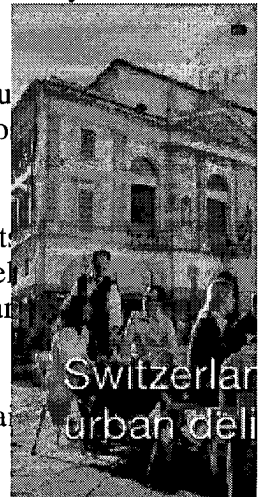
Now Rhode Island is the first state in New England that has been delegated by the EPA to manage its Remodeler/Renovator Program. The EPA has given states the option of running the program themselves or the EPA to do enforcement. The Rhode Island Health Department volunteered to manage the program. Carcieri approved that move last month.

The new law applies to any contractor whose work is expected to disturb 6 or more square feet of paint on a home or 20 square feet on the outside.

Most homes built before 1978 are believed to have lead paint, either inside or outside. When the paint is disturbed, its dust can be ingested by children who then may suffer a wide range of neurological problems.

Tens of thousands of Rhode Island children were found to have elevated lead levels when the state initiated mandatory testing in the early 1990s, with the greatest percentage of cases in the older cities.

But the state's lead-poisoning rate has dropped dramatically in recent years. Vanderslice said he believes one factor is the growing awareness by homeowners and contractors that lead paints are dangerous.



“Now people know that when they have peeling paint, they have problems,” Vanderslice said.

“Rates of childhood lead poisoning in Rhode Island have dropped dramatically in the past 10 years,” state Health Director David R. Gifford said in a statement. “However, we need to continue to prevent this health hazard from having a negative impact on children’s learning and school performance.”

Gifford reports that of the 12,384 children who will enter kindergarten in 2011, 302 — or 2.4 percent — have ever had elevated lead levels.

The Health Department is advising owners of houses built before 1978 to check contractors’ licenses when they have work done. Contractors also should distribute “Renovate Right” booklets to tenants.

Classes for renovators and remodelers are offered by the Childhood Lead Action Project, the Community College of Rhode Island, the Rhode Island Builders Association and others.

Vanderslice says that in the last several years, when the state has learned of violators, it has urged them to clean up mistakes or lose their licenses. The state can also impose fines.

“If we run into some fly-by-night contractor, we report them to the Contractor Registration Board or tell local building officials,” Vanderslice said. “They’ll shut them right down.”

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