Toxic export spars debate

Firms avoid lead emissions laws by sending more dead batteries to Mexico, where rules are lax

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Canada's standards are also lax, and some lead from U.S. batteries is shipped to Mexico, but not nearly as much as used batteries. The most important rule is that the lead be recycled.

“Some corporations have no idea what to do with batteries that are being sent to Mexico,” said Terry Perry, executive director of the Coalition for the Environment.

Until April, the government of Mexico had a zero lead level law that would have prohibited the export of lead batteries. But in April, the government reversed its position and decided to allow the export of lead batteries.

Lead-acid batteries are made of lead and sulfuric acid, which makes them dangerous to expose to lead, even in amounts as small as those used in automotive applications.

“The lead in these batteries is not dangerous to the environment,” said Perry. “But the amount of lead that is in these batteries is significant. If you look at the lead that is in the batteries, you will see that it is not dangerous to the environment.”

Double standard?

It is not just environmentalists worried about the issue. Other countries and lead recyclers are also concerned. The International Lead and Zinc Study Group, for example, has been lobbying the United Nations to adopt a global standard for lead battery recycling.

“Lead is a global problem, and it is not just a U.S. problem,” said the group’s spokesperson. “It is a problem that needs to be addressed globally.”

In late December, Duralum Energy, a Canadian lead battery recycler, announced that it had sold all of its lead batteries to the United States.

In Mexico, on the other hand, the government has been encouraging the recycling of lead batteries.

Some Mexican government officials have even been touring the United States to promote the recycling of lead batteries.

“Mexico is a leader in the recycling of lead batteries,” said one Mexican government official. “We are working hard to ensure that our citizens are not exposed to lead.”

On the other hand, the United States has been criticized for not doing enough to promote the recycling of lead batteries.

“A lot of media attention has been focused on the recycling of lead batteries in the United States,” said a spokesperson for the Environmental Protection Agency. “But the United States is not doing enough to ensure that our citizens are not exposed to lead.”