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October 16, 2008

**TO:** Food Pantry Managers

Local and Tribal Health Officers

DPH Regional Office Directors

***Please forward this information to food pantries in your jurisdictions.***

**FROM:** Chuck Warzecha, Rob Thiboldeaux,

Bureau of Environmental and Occupational Health

**SUBJECT: Information for Food Pantries regarding the distribution of deer killed with lead ammunition.**

On behalf of the Departments of Health Services (DHS), Natural Resources (DNR), and Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP), thank you for your past and continuing participation in the venison donation program. In 2007, hunters and processors participating in the program made possible the donation of 400,000 pounds of venison to needy families throughout the state.

In 2008, Midwestern states, including Wisconsin, began to study venison for the presence of tiny lead ammunition fragments in both commercially and hunter-processed meat. The amount of lead found in these studies is high enough to potentially cause health problems for young children and pregnant women if eaten regularly.

This letter describes how the three agencies are working together to maintain a strong and safe venison donation program for the 2008 deer hunting season. Venison distributed by food pantries represents approximately 2% of the deer harvest in Wisconsin each year. Therefore, in 2008-2009, we will make a larger effort to inform all venison consumers in Wisconsin of the risks associated with consuming large amounts of venison, and food pantries will be asked to play a small role in minimizing lead exposure. The venison donation program provides a significant nutritional benefit to our state's neediest families. The importance of this program was weighed heavily in the development of the state's approach to this issue. The agencies will continue to study this issue following the 2008 season, but we will not take actions that disrupt the program during the distribution period. What we learn from these studies will be used to make the program even safer in coming years.

Four main groups can reduce lead exposure from lead fragments in venison. These are: 1) the hunter, 2) the processor, 3) the food pantry, and 4) the consumer.

### Lead Reduction by Hunters

Hunters typically remove visibly damaged meat and visible bullet slugs from the carcass. However, through education, hunters can be made aware of these options to further eliminate lead exposure from venison:

- Hunters can use ammunition types that either do not contain lead (copper bullets) or are less prone to fine particle fragmentation (bonded or high weight-retention bullets). These forms of ammunition are somewhat more expensive, but overall, their use is likely the least expensive and most effective way to avoid lead exposure.
- Hunters can reduce lead fragments in the major meat-containing parts of the deer by selecting their shots carefully, and not taking difficult shots at running deer.

The DNR has provided this advice in the form of a health advisory in this year's hunting regulations (see shaded box below). The information below appears in the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' *2008 Deer Regulations*:

#### **Health Advisory**

Some deer harvested with lead bullets have been shown to have tiny lead particles or fragments remaining in the processed meat. These are often too small to be seen and can disperse far from the wound channel. Although lead in venison does not rival lead paint in older homes as a health risk for the public, the risk is not low enough to ignore. Children under 6 years and pregnant women are at the greatest risk from lead exposure. The amount of lead found in a small percentage of venison samples suggests that long term effects of lead consumption could occur in people who regularly eat venison shot with lead ammunition. However, there is currently no known evidence linking human consumption of venison to lead poisoning. The following suggestions can reduce potential exposure to lead in venison:

- Consider using expanding, non-lead ammunition such as copper, or other high-weight retention lead bullets such as bonded bullets.
- Practice marksmanship and outdoor skills to get closer, and make cleaner, lethal shots away from major muscle areas. Aim for the vitals behind the shoulder, or the neck or the head. Don't shoot at running deer.
- Avoid consuming internal organs as they can contain extra lead from heart-lung shots.
- Remind your meat processor to not use deer meat with excessive shot damage. Trim a generous distance away from the wound channel and discard any meat that is bruised, discolored or contains hair, dirt, bone fragments or grass.

This is an important issue that will continue to be investigated. Additional information on the lead-in venison issue can be found at [dnr.wi.gov](http://dnr.wi.gov). For a more comprehensive review of lead poisoning go to [www.dhfs.wisconsin.gov](http://www.dhfs.wisconsin.gov).

### Lead Reduction by Processors

Processors are experienced at removing slugs and damaged meat. However, they have not previously had knowledge of the broader dispersion of lead particles from the wound channel. DATCP has provided guidance in a July 14, 2008, letter to processors on best management practices that can reduce the lead that enters the finished meat product including:

- Cut away a wider area around the wound channel.
- Completely discard portions of the deer that are heavily damaged.
- Process small batches and be more diligent in checking for slugs in the grinders.

- Maintain records of production dates that would enable tracking venison found to be contaminated.

The agencies are looking into the collection of some processed venison samples this year to help us understand the extent of the issue and demonstrate the benefits of the steps taken.

#### Exposure Reduction by Food Pantries

Food pantries operate for the benefit of those in need in our communities. Pregnant women and young children are at the greatest risk from the effects of lead exposure, and are among those that regularly use food pantries. Unlike health advisories published for fish consumption, the concentration of lead in venison varies too much to be able to give good advice about how frequently the meat can be safely consumed. Most of the venison packages we tested did not contain lead, but some had high concentrations. Food pantries can help in the following way:

- Food pantries can distribute information about the nutritional benefits of venison that includes advice for pregnant women and young children about reducing their exposure.

#### **Notice to Consumers:**

**Small fragments of lead from bullets were found in some venison from 2007. More steps are being taken this year to keep lead out of venison. Lead poisoning is an important problem, especially among young children. The amount of lead in venison may be high enough to cause effects if it is eaten regularly. Pregnant women and children under 6 should limit the amount of venison they eat.**

State agencies in Wisconsin do not regulate the operation of food pantries and their venison donation activities. However, food pantries have been very cooperative with this issue and they have an interest in making the program work safely. DHS asks that pantries provide the advisory statement below to venison recipients this year.

#### Exposure Reduction by Families

Consumers have control over exposures to their families only when they are adequately informed of the issue. When adequately informed:

- Consumers who are also hunters can choose to use alternative ammunition.
- Pregnant women and children under 6 can reduce the amount of venison they eat during the year.

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter. Because you are important partners in this program, you will be included on discussions about the 2009 hunting/donation season. Please contact Rob Thiboldeaux at (608) 267-6844, if you have questions.