

Policy Track Environmental Issues

Massachusetts Shooting Range Initiative

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I'm here to talk to you about an approach that the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has taken relative to lead management at shooting ranges across the state.

The DEP has developed a partnership. This partnership is something we think other states may wish to consider. In fact, you may wish to consider this approach.

Basically, we look at ranges in terms of the open space they protect. Rod and gun clubs in Massachusetts often have considerable acreage around them. Across Massachusetts, there may be 25,000 acres protected from development pressures by these clubs and ranges.

By developing a cooperative effort, not only can clubs and ranges maintain that open space in the future, they also can be better stewards of the environment. That's what best management practices and environmental stewardship are all about: how a range can operate to protect the environment and future of ranges.

Who is involved in this partnership? There are representatives from each DEP program and office, as well as stakeholders such as the Massachusetts Gun Owners' Action League. Some partners have been great assets in talking to various clubs and sponsoring forums to discuss how things can be done to manage lead better. A number of clubs attend DEP-sponsored meetings where people take a cooperative information sharing approach. If we present a bad idea, people aren't shy about letting us know. There is a good give-and-take in these discussions. The interaction is very helpful.

Our objectives are clear; they are spelled out in the EPA's "Best Management Practices for Lead at Outdoor Shooting Ranges" manual and the National Shooting Sports Foundation's "Environmental Aspects of Construction and Management of Outdoor Shooting Ranges" manual. The manuals include the basic concept that shooting into the water is not a good idea. A regulatory agency or, more likely, a citizen lawsuit usually stops groups from shooting into water and often closes ranges. It makes sense for clubs to be proactive and look for alternative designs and approaches that do not include shooting lead into water.

Water includes wetlands. A lot of local concern exists in Massachusetts about the impact of shooting ranges on wetlands. In some cases, concerns deal with lead, but more often it's about the physical filling that goes on as clay targets drop into wetlands. In some areas, clay targets have built up higher than 5 feet!

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In other parts of the state, the DEP received complaints relative to large accumulations of plastic wadding and shells downstream of rod and gun clubs. Recycling clearly is the focus in our discussions with various groups participating in this private partnership. That's the main message we're trying to establish. By recycling lead and other materials, contaminants are removed from an environmental setting before they become a problem.

In some cases, so much lead accumulates that it is, at least initially, an opportunity for clubs to make money. Fairly large ranges can make a good profit recycling lead. Depending on the range's location and terrain, it may be difficult to get large equipment in to recover shot. DEP is working with others to develop smaller recovery operations—literally vacuuming in some cases. That lead clearly is recyclable.

Sporting clay target ranges present the greatest challenge because they scatter quite a bit of lead. It's more difficult to recover lead from these wooded ranges than from the backstop berm of a rifle or pistol range.

DEP's initiative looks mainly at lead and its associated impacts, and ways to recycle and prevent it from entering the water. We're not involved in some of the side issues that often arise, such as noise impacts or anti-gun sentiment. In Massachusetts, we prefer that state agency participants in our lead shot initiative are shooters themselves.

What caused this initiative to be organized? DEP began receiving complaints from various sides of the issue. In some cases, local conservation commissions that deal with wetland protection visited clubs and found that clay targets were filling wetlands. We also heard concerns about lead issues. Cease-and-desist orders were issued, and clubs were closed. The DEP was brought in at the appeals stage.

Some ranges closed of their own accord, sold because of property values, and former ranges were made into subdivisions. We received calls about those subdivisions from local boards of health concerned about potential lead impacts to children who would grow up in backyards that used to be drop zones for trap or skeet. We also have been involved in several locations where DEP received complaints from club members saying, "I've heard about this lead issue for a few years, and there seem to be some cases at the national level. How come Massachusetts is not doing anything about the lead at these ranges? I've tried to say things at club meetings, but I get shouted down by some."

In response, DEP decided to conduct some research before developing an approach. We looked at what other states were doing and queried our programs and offices to find out what interaction they had. We were surprised how often the issue of lead at ranges surfaced. We talked to experts, including folks at the Wildlife Management Institute (WMI) and National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF), because they had been working on this issue for years.

Initially, there was no written guidance. Bob Byrne, Wildlife Program Coordinator with WMI, invited me to participate in the Shooting Range Guidance Review Committee reviewing the lead issue. This experience was invaluable, because when we spoke to rod and gun clubs, it wasn't only the DEP speaking, but also WMI, NSSF, the National Rifle Association (NRA), and the firearms and shooting range industry saying the same things. It was a tremendous benefit to have everybody looking at issues together.

Massachusetts gets a lot of acid rain. That makes a big difference in soil pH, which makes lead more mobile and a bigger threat to surface water and groundwater. We have some of the worst situations you can imagine regarding lead mobility. We visit ranges to gather ideas and suggestions for handling these issues. In some cases, ranges already have begun to take steps to mitigate lead mobility.

We take a cooperative approach in these meetings with ranges. We work together during face-to-face discussions. People aren't dragged into an enforcement conference. Our range visits normally are by invitation. We organize workshops and take an education and communication approach. Whether tomorrow or five years from now, increased lead management is an issue the firearms and shooting range industry will have to face. The sooner we figure out the best way to face it together, the better off we all will be.

Our initiative involves going from range to range with recommendations from the EPA and NSSF manuals. We encourage folks to read and think about them. Normally there's a bit of reluctance, but range managers soften when they see who put the manuals together and the common sense approach that's used. They understand that it's in their best interest. They're taking the advice quite well.

The manuals suggest that it's important to write down issues facing your range and determine your plan to resolve them, whether you call it an environmental stewardship plan or a best management practices plan. If you have a plan in place, a regulatory agency at the state, local or federal level brought in to address the issue will see that you're trying to work on it. That's a major step forward.

We also ask people to confer with experts that we have organized on the lead shot initiative. We ask people to present their plans for an expert's review. It's the "think before you dig" concept.

The response has been great. We are getting tremendous support from the shooting sports community in Massachusetts. The initiative has been covered on the radio and mentioned in several newspaper and magazine articles. This helps get the word out and brings in more invitations to visit ranges. Ultimately, we have found a high participation rate from range owners and managers in our state.

Lead recycling still is a slow process in Massachusetts. The logistics of persuading contractors to recover and recycle lead have progressed slower than we would like, but we understand that recycling is a new process in our state. We haven't been doing this for a long time, and there's going to be a learning curve. Massachusetts shooting ranges are benefitting from these cooperative efforts to manage lead and address environmental concerns, and open acreage is being protected from development pressures. I recommend that state environmental agencies join with county and federal agencies, communities and sporting organizations to develop similar cooperative efforts.