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Department of Health and Family Services

TO: Local and Tribal Health Officers, DPH Regional Office Directors
FROM: Chuck Warzecha, Bureau of Environmental and Occupational Health
RE: Possible lead contamination in processed venison at food pantries.
DATE: April 17, 2008

By now you may have heard or seen news out of North Dakota or Minnesota related to lead contamination in venison donated to food pantries in those states. Wisconsin has been in contact with those states and we are also conducting sampling of venison from processors in this state. We are taking the reports from the other states seriously. There have been no reports of illness associated with lead in venison. But, as a precaution we have advised that food pantries with donated venison on their shelves hold any remaining product until we have more information.

The concern stems from studies that show bullet fragments (particularly from high velocity rifles) dispersing widely in the meat, and then incorporated into the ground meat from processors. We are working with the DNR and DATCP to better understand the issue and formulate clearer advice for the public. We are testing venison to determine if bullet particles in wild game pose a health issue. If we get similar results to what Minnesota has received, it is possible we will recommend disposal of the remaining venison at food pantries.

Because of the extensive blood lead surveillance we have done, we are confident that the primary source of lead poisoning in the state comes from chipping and peeling lead paint. Eating venison has not been identified as a concern from this surveillance. However, we are unable to rule this issue out as a possible source of unsafe lead exposure.

We have sent messages to the food pantries in the TEFAP program (The Emergency Food Assistance Program). However, that does not include all food pantries. Please pass this advisory on to other food pantries in your area.

Please address any questions on this matter to Chuck Warzecha (608/264-9880) in the Bureau of Environmental and Occupational Health. Thank you.