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By Peter Shawn Taylor

This year's fishing season could be the last time Canadian anglers are allowed to use those ubiquitous lead fishing sinkers. That's because the federal government is proposing to ban lead tackle and force fishermen to find more expensive alternatives. But even non-anglers should be concerned with how and why the government is making this decision.

The circumstances surrounding the proposed lead-sinker ban reveal that whimsy and fabrication have replaced science in setting environmental policies. The government and the environmental group that has spearheaded this crusade, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), claim the move is necessary to save Canadian loons from lead poisoning. Yet the actual evidence suggests the size and danger of the lead-sinker issue has been grotesquely exaggerated. And if the Liberals are prepared to pervert scientific evidence in order to justify new laws for picayune issues such as fishing tackle, what does this suggest for bigger and more significant policies?

Now urban folk might require a bit of background on the lead debate. In 1991, the U.S. banned lead shotgun pellets because of evidence that they found their way into lakes and rivers and were then ingested by water birds, causing lead poisoning in loons. Canada followed suit in 1997 with its own ban on lead shot.

But success on lead shot prompted a broader and bolder agenda, one that appears to be part lead hysteria and part antifishing campaign. Today the WWF and the federal government's Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) argue that if banning lead shot makes sense, then it must also make sense to ban lead fishing tackle, since those small sinkers could get snagged or lost and end up on lake bottoms as well.

The WWF and CWS even came up with a catchy factoid — they claim 500 tonnes of lead sinkers are deposited in Canadian waterways annually. "That's the equivalent weight of dropping 500 cars into our lakes, rivers and streams each year," said former Environment Minister David Anderson last year in announcing the proposal to ban lead sinkers. And this is where policy parts ways with logic and science.

There's a fundamental difference between firing a shotgun shell over water and watching the pellets fall into the lake, and fishing with a sinker. Shotgun pellets are not designed to be reused. Sinkers are. In fact there is no reason why a careful fisherman couldn't use a handful of sinkers his entire life. That famous 500-tonne figure — and the image of an endless parade of cars being driven off piers into our lakes — assumes that every fisherman in Canada manages to lose his entire collection of sinkers at the end of every season. Selling a sinker is, in the government's mind, the same as ramming it down the throat of an unsuspecting loon.

Then there is the fact that a sizeable portion, perhaps even a majority by weight, of lead sinkers sold in Canada are not the tiny bits of metal you squeeze on your line, but what are called downrigger balls. These are five to 10-pound weights used for trolling for Great Lake salmon and other deep-water fish. And if there are loons out there swallowing 10-pound balls of lead, the environment has bigger problems than sinker ingestion.

But of course all this is just speculation. If there really is a credible danger to waterbirds from lead sinkers, then there should be a scientific process to determine the extent of the havoc being wreaked.

In fact, ingestion of lead sinkers has been studied extensively on both sides of the border. When environmentalists first began moving against lead sinkers, the U.S. National Wildlife Health Center in Madison, Wisc., was asked to study the issue. Scientists there examined 2,240 individual waterbirds over four years and found only 23 birds (including 11 loons) that had lead sinkers in their stomachs. A larger study in Illinois found one bird out of 16,651 was carrying a lead sinker. As a result of these findings, the U.S. government abandoned plans for a nation-wide lead-sinker ban.

Canadian research reveals the same basic level of lead-sinker mortality north of the border. Between 1964 and 1999, the CWS was able to identify 71 birds and one turtle that had died from swallowing lead sinkers. A more recent study shows much the same thing. A 2003 CWS publication says: "An average of six cases of wildlife mortality from sinker ingestion have been documented annually in Canada between 1987 and 1998." Six dead birds. Per year. It's not exactly a bird holocaust out there.

Now this might be compared with the thousands of loons that have died over the past three years on Lake Erie due to botulism. Or the fact that virtually the entire loon nesting habitat was wiped out in 2004 on Lake of the Woods when the water table rose precipitously. Or that the North American loon population is estimated at 700,000 birds.

Six dead birds nationwide due to lead sinker ingestion is insignificant to the point of amusing. Or it would be, if not for the fact that the federal government has seen fit to ignore its own scientific evidence when making policy. Brochures from Environment Canada call lead-sinker ingestion "the leading cause of death reported in adult common loons." The WWF for its part has claimed that the lead-based loonie death toll "could be as high as 30,000 birds per year" in Ontario alone. It is pure fantasy.

This winter, Environment Minister Stephane Dion claimed to hold a consultation on the lead-sinker debate. But with his department working hand in glove (or worm on hook) with the WWF and a ban already unveiled as the preferred policy of the government, the fishing community is bracing for an inevitable end to lead sinkers some time this year.

The actual monetary impact of a ban is a question mark. Sinkers themselves are relatively inexpensive and phasing out lead might only add a few bucks a year to the cost of fishing. Yet the proposed regulation talks about banning any tackle with a 1% lead content, which would include brass fishing reels and a wide variety of spinners, jigs and other paraphernalia. And at a much greater cost to the industry.

Regardless of whether the cost is big or little, however, the key issue remains the process by which government is making this decision, since it appears to be driven by an egregious misrepresentation of scientific evidence. Biologist David Ankney is a member of the CWS editorial board, but he takes a dim view of what passes for science at that government agency. "In my 30 years as a wildlife scientist, I've seen bad science and I've seen abuse of science," he says of the 2003 CWS report on lead-sinker ingestion. "But never have I seen so much bad science and abuse of science in one document."

If six dead loons can become the basis for a policy that could force Canadians to spend more money, change their habits or even give up fishing — in other words, if a fact-blind environmental agenda can drive government actions — then what else is Ottawa capable of manipulating? Easy question, of course. The answer is Kyoto.

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