



## Era of leaded petrol over, eliminating a major threat to human and planetary health

Press release, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/era-leaded-petrol-over-eliminating-major-threat-human-and-planetary>

- Official end of use of leaded petrol will prevent more than 1.2 million premature deaths and save USD 2.45 trillion a year
- The end of leaded petrol follows a 19-year campaign led by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and partners
- UNEP urges countries to work towards zero emissions vehicles to further address air pollution and climate change

Nairobi, 30 August 2021 – When service stations in Algeria stopped providing leaded petrol in July, the use of leaded petrol ended globally. This development follows an almost two decades long campaign by the UNEP-led global Partnership for Clean Fuels and Vehicles (PCFV).

Since 1922, the use of tetraethyllead as a petrol additive to improve engine performance has been a catastrophe for the environment and public health. By the 1970s, almost all petrol produced around the world contained lead. When the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) began its campaign to eliminate lead in petrol in 2002, it was one of the most serious environmental threats to human health.

2021 has marked the end of leaded petrol worldwide, after it has contaminated air, dust, soil, drinking water and food crops for the better part of a century. Leaded petrol causes heart disease, stroke and cancer. It also affects the development of the human brain, especially harming children, with studies suggesting it reduced 5-10 IQ points. Banning the use of leaded petrol has been estimated to prevent more than 1.2 million premature deaths per year, increase IQ points among children, save USD 2.45 trillion for the global economy, and decrease crime rates.

“The successful enforcement of the ban on leaded petrol is a huge milestone for global health and our environment,” said Inger Andersen, Executive Director of UNEP. “Overcoming a century of deaths and illnesses that affected hundreds of millions and degraded the environment worldwide, we are invigorated to change humanity’s trajectory for the better through an accelerated transition to clean vehicles and electric mobility.”

By the 1980s, most high-income countries had prohibited the use of leaded petrol, yet as late as 2002, almost all low- and middle-income countries, including some Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) members, were still using leaded petrol. The PCFV is a public-private partnership that brought all stakeholders to the table, providing technical assistance, raising awareness, overcoming local challenges and resistance from local oil dealers and producers of lead, as well as investing in refinery upgrades.

Dr. Kwaku Afriyie, Minister of Environment Science, Technology and Innovation in Ghana, said “When the UN began working with governments and businesses to phase out lead from petrol, sub-Saharan African nations enthusiastically embraced this opportunity. Ghana was one of five West African countries to join early sub-regional workshops and declarations. Following PCFV’s media campaigns, reports, studies, exposing illegalities, and public testing done to expose high levels of lead in the population’s blood, Ghana became ever more determined to free its fuel from lead.”

Despite this progress, the fast-growing global vehicle fleet continues to contribute to the threat of local air, water and soil pollution, as well as to the global climate crisis: the transport sector is responsible for nearly a quarter of energy-related global greenhouse gas emissions and is set to grow to one third



by 2050.

While many countries have already begun transitioning to electric cars, 1.2 billion new vehicles will hit the road in the coming decades, and many of these will use fossil fuels, especially in developing countries. This includes millions of poor-quality used vehicles exported from Europe, the United States and Japan, to mid- and low-income countries. This contributes to planet warming and air polluting traffic and bound to cause accidents.

“That a UN-backed alliance of governments, businesses and civil society was able to successfully rid the world of this toxic fuel is testament to the power of multilateralism to move the world towards sustainability and a cleaner, greener future,” Ms. Andersen said. “We urge these same stakeholders to take inspiration from this enormous achievement to ensure that now that we have cleaner fuels, we also adopt cleaner vehicles standards globally – the combination of cleaner fuels and vehicles can reduce emissions by more than 80%.”

In addition, while we have now eliminated the largest source of lead pollution, urgent action is still needed to stop lead pollution from other sources – such as lead in paints, leaded batteries, and lead in household items.

The end of leaded petrol is expected to support the realization of multiple Sustainable Development Goals, including good health and well-being (SDG3), clean water (SDG6), clean energy (SDG7), sustainable cities (SDG11), climate action (SDG13) and life on land (SDG15). It also offers an opportunity for restoring ecosystems, especially in urban environments, which have been particularly degraded by this toxic pollutant. Finally, it marks major progress ahead of this year’s International Day of Clean Air for blue skies on the 7th of September.

#### **About the Partnership for Clean Fuels and Vehicles (PCFV):**

In 2002, the Partnership for Clean Fuels and Vehicles (PCFV) was set up at the World Summit on Sustainable Development. UNEP hosted the Secretariat with the aim of eliminating leaded petrol globally and provided support to many countries and regional initiatives. At the time, 117 countries world-wide were still using leaded petrol with 86 countries supported to phase out leaded petrol. In 2006, the first major success was achieved – Sub-Saharan Africa went unleaded. The last country to switch was Algeria in July 2021.

#### **About the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)**

UNEP is the leading global voice on the environment. It provides leadership and encourages partnership in caring for the environment by inspiring, informing and enabling nations and peoples to improve their quality of life without compromising that of future generations.



Artist: Elizabeth O'Brien

Title: The world is cursed until TEL is banned,  
Lead-Safety Message: **When Tetra Ethyl Lead (TEL) is banned in Aviation Fuel as well as Motor Fuel, Earthlings will have a fighting chance of fulfilling our potential.**

Description of Work: Text created in Powerpoint, on Photo of Roman curse tablet (made of lead) © Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons, from

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URL: <https://volcanoartprize.com/portfolio-item/the-world-is-cursed-until-tel-is-banned/>