



By Dan DeWeese  
Editor at Large

## Bootmakers Search Soles to Get the Lead Out

**I**n mid-December, manufacturers and importers of children's footwear, including Western boots, were blindsided by new legislation few knew much about. That's when the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) issued a February 10 deadline for compliance of the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act. CPSIA restricts the amount of lead allowed in accessible parts of products used by children 12 years old and under.

Not only was the deadline imminent, the new rules and standards were vague and no information was provided about how to achieve compliance. It was the ultimate Catch 22, production of many children's products, including toys, bedding, safety equipment and apparel stopped overnight.

The outcries of bewildered and panicked manufacturers and importers prompted the agency to refine and clarify the means and standards of testing, as well as the products being targeted. Compliance deadlines were also extended. Still, the process is causing heartburn among domestic manufacturers and importers of affected products. A source at Justin Boots, which has 60 kids' boots to test, says it is "a lengthy, methodical and cumbersome task."

Bob Thorp, president of Smoky Mountain Boots in Doraville, Ga., expects to be able to resume importing boots again in June, after a five-month hiatus for all 103 styles of children's boots the company offers. Thorp says three components of children's footwear are under the greatest scrutiny: the outsoles, separate heels and labels. Other components may contain lead, such as piping and the dyes used on the leathers, but it is Thorp's understanding that reaching compliance on soles, heels and labels will allow bootmakers to get production going again.

Ink used to print information on labels is notoriously heavy in lead, but can be replaced with lead-free inks, a relatively easy and inexpensive change. The synthetic soles and heels on children's boots are a bigger issue. Polyvinyl chloride (PVC), which is durable and inexpensive to produce when lead is used to stabilize it, is commonly used in the soles and heels of children's footwear. As boots get tested by independent labs, which are in short supply and already backed up, manufacturers are scrambling to find alternative materials. Thorp says he expects to be ahead of the game because the thermal plastic rubber (TPR) soles he puts on his children's boots has little or no lead.

Thorp estimates that compliance with new lead limits will ultimately raise the price of Smoky Mountain Boots about a dollar per pair. It is safe to guess that boots traditionally using PVC soles will find their compliance costs higher. A possible casualty in all this may be brightly colored boots.

"Bright colors, especially red, are apt to have more lead in the dyes used on the leathers," Thorp explained.

Boots already in stock or on retail shelves are exempt from the testing requirements until February 10, 2010, unless they are known to include excessive levels of lead. Thorp, who has attended seminars on the new law, says there are no reports of lead poisoning from a footwear product—lead-footed drivers notwithstanding. Once a specific boot SKU has been approved, it can enter the marketplace; a new boot or any changes to a boot, even a single component, will have to pass muster before it can be sold.

Additional changes to the rules and regulations are anticipated. "A lot of this has not been finalized," Thorp said. Retailers unsure about the status of their kid's boot brands should contact their vendors. For more CPSIA information and updates, visit [www.cpsc.gov](http://www.cpsc.gov).

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