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WEST

Recalled Thomas toys in stores

State finds more unsafe pieces; recall may widen

By Maurice Possley

Tribune staff reporter

Nearly two weeks after a national recall of 1.5 million Thomas & Friends wooden railway toys, a spot check of more than 100 retailers by state investigators showed that the toys still were on sale in a handful of stores and that numerous other stores had failed to post recall

notices, the Illinois attorney general's office announced Wednesday.

Further, the investigators turned up packages of the toys that at first glance appeared not to be included in the recall but on closer examination were found to have a second wooden toy train piece inside that is part of the recall. Company officials later told state authorities

that some toys subject to recall may be packaged with toys not covered by the recall.

As a result, the attorney general's office said the scope of the wooden train recall could be much larger than originally thought and that its investigators likely will conduct another statewide sweep to check whether those train sets are being pulled from store shelves.

The attorney general's office, prompted by a Tribune report Sunday of lead paint being found on a metal Take Along Thomas railway toy, also obtained about 20 samples and plans to have them tested. The story detailed how a Kansas City public health nurse complained to the Consumer Product Safety Commission last year after a check at the home of a child who had an elevated level of lead poisoning showed the train car was covered with

paint containing lead. The nurse said she had never been contacted by the safety commission.

Atty. Gen. Lisa Madigan on Wednesday expressed her frustration over what her investigation has discovered and lashed out at the safety commission.

"What we have found is that it is a disaster," Madigan said. "The entire process designed to protect our children from un-

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TOYS: Recall among largest in years for lead threat

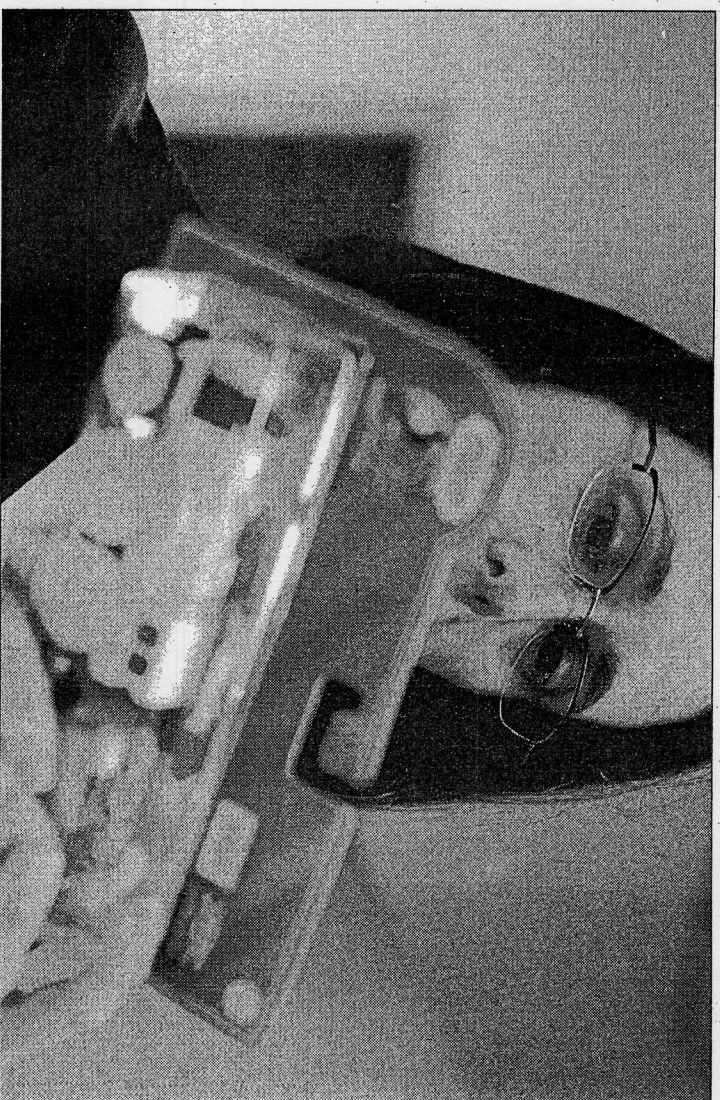
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safe products is a disaster. The Consumer Product Safety Commission is understaffed and underfunded and uninterested. They don't do any testing. As a parent, what are we supposed to do, become amateur scientists?"

The lack of clarity echoes the findings of a Tribune investigation published last month that uncovered warnings the agency missed about popular Magnetix toys shedding dangerous magnets, warnings that presaged the death of a suburban Seattle toddler and the serious intestinal injuries of more than two dozen other children. When swallowed, the aspirin-size magnets tear through a child's intestines. The two Magnetix recalls that followed the toddler's death were so confusing that consumers and retailers couldn't tell which versions of the toy were potentially deadly.

The distributor of the Take Along Thomas and Thomas & Friends railway toys, RC2 Corp. of Oak Brook, said there have been no reports of illnesses or injuries involving the products it recalled.

RC2 has said that the CPSC never notified it of the complaint filed by Julianne West,



Illinois Atty. Gen. Lisa Madigan on Wednesday examines a Thomas toy that will be tested for lead paint. State investigators have found eight stores failed to remove the toys or post recall notices.

Tribune photo by Candice C. Cusick

the Kansas City nurse, and the CPSC has declined to comment about the complaint because the investigation of the recall is ongoing. The company has advised consumers to call the firm at 866-725-4407 or visit its Web site at <http://recalls.rc2.com>.

On June 13, the CPSC announced the recall of the Thomas & Friends wooden railway toys. None of the company's metal trains were included. But when state investigators began purchasing packages of the Red James Engine & Red James' #5 Coal Tender that listed the toys as metal, they

found that the coal tender was made of wood and subject to the recall.

Investigators purchased about 20 of the toys, and they will be sent to an environmental testing laboratory. Results are expected by next week, Madigan's office said.

"The fact that these mixed products would be overlooked is a problem," said Cara Smith, Madigan's deputy chief of staff for policy and communication. "I'm a lawyer and I can't figure this out. We may have a much larger recall problem than any one thought in Illinois and

across the nation."

A spokeswoman for RC2 declined to comment about the apartment confusion and referred inquiries to Madigan's office.

Madigan said she requested a meeting with RC2 and expected to sit down with its officials next week.

"We want to talk to them about a wide range of issues, including the details of their corrective plan," she said. "In terms of products, the distributor as well as the manufacturer ought to bear some responsibility."

Smith said information from the company indicates that the

popular train toys in various combinations have been manufactured at three factories in China. Because of the confusion over the sets that contain both wooden and metal toys, she believes the state's survey may have missed recalled toys on the shelves, and that the investigators likely will be sent back to stores that reported they had none of the recalled toys.

"We only asked about the wooden sets, not any mixed sets," she said.

The investigators visited 138 retail outlets throughout the state and found 55 stores that carried the Thomas & Friends railway toys. Just under half of the stores, 24, had pulled the toy and posted the notice of the recall, Smith said.

Eight stores—three Target outlets, two Kohl's, a Wal-Mart, a Kmart and the Chicago Children's Museum gift shop—had failed to take the recalled items from the shelves or post the recall notices, she said. Three Toys "R" Us stores had posted the notice but left the recalled toys on the shelves.

Twenty other stores had removed the toys from their shelves but did not post the notice of the recall, Smith said.

The recall is one of the largest in recent years for toys containing lead, a toxic metal linked to brain damage in children. The company has said it discovered the problem but has declined to discuss how, when or where the discovery was made.

China, where the toy trains were made, is the source of more than eight out of 10 toy recalls since 2004 and the source of 72 percent of all recalls since 2004

for children's products, including toys, according to a Tribune analysis of CPSC recall data.

On Wednesday, Huixun Zhang, Chinese consul in Chicago, issued a statement saying the Chinese government is "very much concerned about consumer products safety and has worked out strict examination and quarantine systems on its export products. Most manufacturers and exporters can abide by the related rules and regulations, while only very few of them are trying to boost their profits by unscrupulously lowering the standards of products."

Zhang said the government has attempted to cooperate with other countries on quality-control issues and has held seminars for Chinese toy manufacturers along with the Toy Industry Association and the CPSC.

"We realize that China is far from perfect in quality control of its products and are willing to widen and deepen cooperation with the United States and other countries ... to protect interests and ensure safety of consumers all over the world," he said in the statement. "Since June 1, 2007, China has banned the sale of toys that fail to pass a national compulsory safety certification."

Madigan, the mother of a 2-year-old girl, said, "If you want your children to have toys, you pretty much have to buy things made in China. But it's terrifying. We had a couple of [Thomas & Friends toys], and they are gone."

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