

Online environmental history symposium, May 20, 2025

The Public Health Service and leaded gasoline



The US Public Health Service headquarters was the location of the 1925 leaded gasoline conference. The Longworth House Office Building now occupies the site. (US Coast and Geodetic Survey photo).

Leaded gasoline is among the most tragic and preventable public health disasters in history. Hundreds died or were hospitalized for life from refinery exposure immediately after the fuel was introduced. Today, world health organizations estimate that widespread use of leaded gasoline has led to millions of deaths and severe disabilities worldwide.

Tetraethyl lead as an octane booster was developed in 1921 at General Motors and marketed in 1923 in a partnership with Standard Oil (Exxon). Following a series of bizarre refinery deaths and incidents of violent insanity in 1924, the Public Health Service called a conference on May 20, 1925 in Washington DC.

Major figures from industry, government, science, and occupational health who attended the conference included Alice Hamilton, Thomas Midgley, Charles F. Kettering, E.R. Hayhurst, Yandell Henderson, Grace Burnham, and others. This was the moment when a Standard Oil Co. research director Frank A. Howard said leaded gasoline was a “Gift of God,” only to be rebuked by public health advocates who reminded him that the workers who died in Standard’s refineries certainly wouldn’t see it that way.

The PHS conference did not result in regulations, but the conversation is well worth remembering.

One hundred years ago, American labor, industry and public health experts met at the US Public Health Service to consider regulating leaded gasoline. During the conference, science confronted industry, public health wrestled with private profit, and some of the giants of their age confronted the great questions of their time -- and ours.

On the centennial of that conference, we have an opportunity to explore the meaning of the leaded gasoline disaster. What do we now know that was not known in the past? Are there other well-known poisons in fuels that are not being regulated today? What lessons for the future should we consider? And, as the Trump Administration is determined to dismantle the Environmental Protection Agency, what is the value of environmental regulation after all?

Speakers include Dr. Bruce Lanphear, Dr. Howard Mielke, Dr. Jerome Nriagu, Dr. David Rosner, Prof. Thomas Beller, Daniel Stone, David Hallberg, and others.

WHEN & WHERE / MORE INFO

Tuesday, May 20, 2025, 10:00 am - noon / Free
Via zoom, password 1925, [at this location](#)
More information: bill.kovarik@gmail.com
To be recorded and posted here:
<https://www.environmentalhistory.org>

Link to original 1925 [PHS transcript](#)

DISTINGUISHED SPEAKERS

Dr. Bruce Lanphear, Simon Fraser University, Faculty of Health Sciences

Premiering a short video: *Toxic Hearts: How Industry Fueled the Heart Disease Epidemic*,
<https://www.sfu.ca/fhs/about/people/profiles/bruce-lanphear.html>

Dr. David K. Rosner, Lauterstein Professor of Sociomedical Sciences and Professor of History, Columbia University, co-author with Gerald Markowitz of numerous books, most recently: *Building the Worlds that Kill Us*

<https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/profile/david-rosner-phd>

Dr. Jerome Nriagu, University of Michigan, Environmental Health Sciences

Author of *Lead and Lead Poisoning in Antiquity* and widely noted research on environmental justice and metals contamination. “As this country dismantles its environmental protections, we look to the past to see if there are lessons that can be learned.”

<https://sph.umich.edu/faculty-profiles/nriagu-jerome.html>

Prof. Thomas Beller - Historian, writer, author of *Degas at the Gas Station*, Nov 2025, and *Wearing the lead glasses*, May 2019, <https://placesjournal.org/article/wearing-the-lead-glasses/>
<https://liberalarts.tulane.edu/english/people/thomas-beller>

Daniel Stone – Author of *American Poison*, 2025, lecturer for the Johns Hopkins MS in Environmental Sciences and Policy program. <https://advanced.jhu.edu/directory/daniel-stone/>
<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/724815/american-poison-by-daniel-stone/>

David Hallberg -- Founder of the Renewable Fuels Association, associate with the [Clean Fuels Development Coalition](#) in Washington DC. <https://nebraskaexaminer.com/2025/02/04/children-and-americans-need-protecting-from-deadly-gasoline-carcinogens/>

ABOUT THIS EVENT:

This independent online symposium is organized by [Prof. Bill Kovarik](#), a media and environmental historian based at Radford University (a public institution once part of Virginia Tech). The symposium will be recorded and available at no cost through the [Environmental History Timeline](#) (<https://www.environmentalhistory.org>).

ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY RESOURCES

[Transcript: Public Health Service conference on leaded gasoline](#), May 20, 1925

Original documents, [Ethyl Leaded gasoline and alternatives](#)

Int'l Journal Env & Occupational Health, [Leaded gasoline historical overview, 2005](#)

[Timeline of lead and leaded gasoline history](#)

[Leaded gasoline centennial panel](#), (video) December 9, 2021