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Texas license plates take environmental turn for the better

AUSTIN - Texas motorists receiving new general issue license plates may notice a remarkably lightweight feel to the plates. The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) has switched from steel to environmental friendly recycled aluminum for the 8 million license plates manufactured by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) each year.

The state began manufacturing specialty license plates from recycled aluminum in October 2004 but continued to produce steel general issue plates until the steel supply was recently exhausted. Other than the lighter weight material, the physical differences between the steel and aluminum plates will be unnoticeable – the new plates will have the same look and embossed characters as the old ones.

“Every three months, Americans discard enough aluminum to rebuild our entire commercial air fleet” said Jerry Dike, director, Vehicle Titles and Registration Division. “We are excited about putting some of that aluminum to good use in our license plates.”

TxDOT will use approximately 2 million pounds of recycled aluminum in one year. Sources of reclaimed aluminum include beverage cans, siding, gutters, storm window frames, lawn furniture and other materials. Although about 65 percent of the country’s aluminum is being recycled, more than one million tons of aluminum are discarded each year. Despite its light weight, aluminum is a more durable material for license plates than steel. When designed to the same standards as steel, it yields higher overall strength. It is also more resistant to corrosion and produces flatter plates with minimal warping. The state will still require vehicle owners to replace their license plates every seven years to maintain reflectivity standards.

The material holds benefits in the manufacturing process as well. Aluminum is gentler to machinery components, which could reduce maintenance. It also requires only a “hot rinse” in the manufacturing process, eliminating an extra wash/rinse tank that is required for steel. TDCJ modified its equipment in order to produce license plates from aluminum.

Workers in county offices welcome the new aluminum license plates for another practical reason. The boxes of plates are much lighter. A box of aluminum plates weighs about 12 pounds—a breeze to lift when compared to the much heavier 22-pound box of steel plates.

Aluminum is the material of choice for license plates in the United States and is successfully used in 44 other states.

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