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TxDOT Converts License Plate Material to Recycled Aluminum

Texas vehicles will soon be outfitted with lighter, more environmentally friendly license plates. The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) is switching from steel to 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 early October. General issue plates will continue to be made from steel for several more months until current supplies are exhausted. All new license plates will be made from aluminum sometime next year.

“The state will see several benefits by switching to aluminum license plates,” said Jerry Dike, director of TxDOT’s Vehicle Titles and Registration Division. “We are particularly pleased about using recycled aluminum, which will keep literally tons of waste out of our landfills each year.”

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.

Aluminum costs slightly more up front than galvanized steel, but its lighter weight will result in a savings of over \$121,000 in freight and mailing costs. At current metal pricing, an aluminum plate will cost about 33 cents to produce while a steel plate costs approximately 25 cents. Aluminum coils will also require less storage space than steel.

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.

- 30 -

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