A wide-ranging industry and government coalition has produced guidelines to protect bridge rehabilitation and demolition workers from lead exposure on the job.

The document, *Model Specifications for the Protection of Workers from Lead on Steel Structures*, provides language for contracts issued by state and federal transportation agencies for work on steel bridges, elevated highways and other structures covered with paint-containing lead.

The specifications should also be useful for other government or private-sector owners planning work on lead-painted structures, such as water and chemical storage tanks, and lead abatement projects in older housing or on hazardous waste sites.

Among other things, the document covers engineering and work practice controls, worker training, respiratory protection worker exposure assessment, applicable documents and quality assurance.

The 50-member Working Group consisting of contractors and representatives of labor, state health and transportation agencies, and other government agencies developed the guidelines to reduce lead exposure among rehabilitation and demolition workers. During torch burning and abrasive blasting on lead-painted bridges, ironworkers, painters and others have received exposures as much as 400 times OSHA’s new interim lead standard for construction.

Lead-based paint coats 5 billion feet of nonresidential surface area in the United States, including an estimated 89 percent of the nation’s steel bridges carrying public roads. The California occupational Lead Registry in 1987 through 1989 showed that construction workers were a disproportionate share of workers with blood-lead levels of 60 micrograms per deciliter. (At that level, OSHA requires removal from the lead exposure.) The workers all reported tasks involving contact with lead-based paint, such as cutting painted metal with torches.

Lead can cause permanent damage to the reproductive, nervous, gastrointestinal and cardiovascular systems. The children of workers exposed to lead are at risk if lead dust is inadvertently carried home on work clothes, vehicles or personal belongings.

Yet most state transportation agencies lack clear rules to protect workers from lead-based paint encountered during work on infrastructure. Owners are seen as key to improved conditions because they hire contractors and define the work to be done. The best approach to ensure lead protection for workers is to require that contractors include such costs in their bids; that way, no contractor needs fear being underbid by contractors who don’t plan such a program. Written specifications for health and safety have the force of a legal contract.

A few states, notably Connecticut...
and New Jersey, have been requiring such language. Other states, such as Maryland, have begun to incorporate some of the language of the Working Group's specifications.

The guidelines incorporate requirements mandated by the OSHA interim standard, which took effect last spring. But the OSHA rules don’t necessarily provide for the more extreme lead exposures in rehabilitation work; nor do their rules provide for the often-short durations of the employment. So, the specifications go further and offer alternative language. For instance, for medical surveillance, the Working Group recommends blood monitoring more often than OSHA does—and when a worker leaves a job. Additionally, the specifications recommend industrial hygiene site evaluations and implementation of controls when worker blood-lead levels are found to increase.

The specifications were developed at the initiative of Robert A. Georgine, president of the Building and Construction Trades Department, AFL-CIO, and of the Center to Protect Worker's Rights, in cooperation with the Occupational Health Foundation and the Steel Structures Painting Council. CPWR is the research arm of the Building and Construction Trades Department, AFL-CIO, which consists of 15 affiliate international unions and 4 million workers. The Occupational Health Foundation provides health and safety services to unions. And the Steel Structures Painting Council is a nonprofit professional society with 8,000 individual and more than 500 organization members-including contractors, manufacturers, engineers and industrial hygienists—involving in the steel coatings industry.

For a free copy of the specifications, contact the Occupational Health Foundation, 1126 16th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20006; fax (202) 877-0191. Or write the Center to Protect Worker's Rights, 111 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20001.