For the third time this summer, Mattel issued a major recall, telling parents yesterday to watch out for Chinese-made toys with excessive amounts of lead, including locomotive toys and accessories for its iconic Barbie brand.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission said the company is recalling 773,900 toys. Mattel said it discovered the use of lead-based paint as part of an ongoing investigation of the toys it gets from China and once again found that contractors had used uncertified paint. "We apologize again to everyone affected and promise that we will continue to focus on ensuring the safety and quality of our toys," Robert A. Eckert, Mattel's chief executive, said in a statement. The contractors that used the uncertified paint no longer work for Mattel, the statement said.

The company is recalling 675,000 Barbie accessories, including Barbie Dream Puppy House, in which lead paint was found on the dog, according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission. The recall also includes 8,900 Big Big World 6-in-1 Bongo Band toys and about 90,000 Geo Trax locomotive toys. The products were sold from September 2006 to last month.

All contain excessive amounts of lead, according to the CPSC. Lead poisoning has been linked to behavioral and developmental problems in children. The CPSC bans paint with more than 0.06 percent lead.

The items are small and "don't pose a lead poisoning risk in themselves," said Julie Vallese, an agency spokeswoman. "But because lead is cumulative, you want to remove it from a child's environment each and every time you can."

The recall follows the company's recall in early August of 1.5 million toys, 900,000 of them in the United States, including some of Big Bird, Elmo and Dora the Explorer. Later that month, Mattel said it was recalling 18 million more toys, including more than 200,000 toys sold in the United States related to the movie "Cars." A majority of products in that recall had magnets that can become dislodged and cause intestinal problems if swallowed.

Mattel blamed the use of lead-based paint on its Chinese contractors and said consumers should expect more recalls as the company strengthens its safety system and reviews products already in the pipeline. About 65 percent of Mattel's toys are from China.

In a full-page ad in today's Washington Post, the company says: "As promised, in recent weeks, we have been busy testing and retesting toys before they leave factories. Our recent voluntary recalls are part of our ongoing promise to ensure the safety of your children."

Mattel's recalls come after a massive recall by RC2 in June of some of its Thomas & Friends Wooden Railway line because of lead. Together, they fed an industry-wide examination of safety standards.

The CPSC is continuing to investigate the issue of lead in children's toys, Vallese said. "So there is a possibility of more recalls."
The challenge for Mattel and other toy manufacturers is retaining the confidence of parents, especially heading into the Christmas shopping season, consumer advocates have said. The most recent recall could show that Mattel is following through on its pledge to evaluate its entire production line, said Chris Byrne, a toy industry consultant. “This should help Mattel in the long run,” Byrne said.

Recalls of Chinese-made products, including toys, toothpaste and tires, have generated calls in Congress to revamp the way the United States ensures the safety of its imports. A presidential panel is scheduled to issue a strategic plan this month, and Congress is expected to consider legislation requiring greater testing of goods before they reach the United States.

“It’s clear that our consumer product safety net has a hole in it the size of China,” Rep. Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.) said in a statement. “While these recalls are an important step to pull thousands of unsafe toys from the shelves, I remain concerned that many more harmful children’s products may be proliferating in the marketplace without parents knowing the dangers.”

Some proposals target the regulatory powers of the CPSC, which consumer advocates have called ineffective in the face of increasing imports.

“The only thing more frightening than these tainted toys from China falling into the hands of children is how powerless the very agency in charge of consumer protection is to stop it,” said Sen. Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.).

China, the source of 80 percent of the toys sold in the United States, has fought attempts to label its products unsafe and has said it is cracking down on problematic firms. Chinese Embassy officials have said the country is increasing its inspections and oversight.

Staff writer Annys Shin contributed to this report.

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