

PRESS RELEASE

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Environmentalists Ask Governor Bush to Take Additional Steps to Protect Florida From Health Effects of Wood Preservatives

Washington, D.C. (April 18, 2001) – In light of the recent statement made by Governor Jeb Bush of Florida that the state will switch to using wood preservatives that do not contain arsenic in the state's wood treatment plant, Beyond Pesticides wrote today to the Governor urging him to take additional steps to phase out the use of treated wood products. Research has linked all three of the primary wood preserving chemicals, namely chromated copper arsenate (CCA), pentachlorophenol (penta), and creosote, to a host of human health problems including cancer, and birth defects. These toxic chemicals are now obsolete due to the presence of alternative technologies that are currently available on the market. Beyond Pesticides asks the Governor to pursue legislative action that would require the principle users of treated wood products, including utilities (utility poles), builders (treated lumber) and the railroad (railroad ties) to conduct studies to determine the feasibility of switching to alternatives such as recycled steel, plastic composites and concrete.

CCA treated wood has been in the news from coast to coast since mid-March when high levels of arsenic were discovered in the soil of a series of playgrounds in the State of Florida. The arsenic leached out of the playground equipment that was made from wood containing arsenic and chromium (VI), both classified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as known human carcinogens. In reaction to the discovery of the arsenic in the playground soil, Florida officials chose to close a number of parks as a precautionary measure. Governor Jeb Bush said he wants the state's own wood-treatment plant to stop using arsenic as a preservative. Florida Department of Environmental Protection officials recently visited EPA in Washington, DC, asking EPA to reconsider the regulatory exemption that keeps CCA treated wood from being classified as hazardous waste.

"The solution to the problem of environmental contamination and thus human exposure to these toxic chemicals requires a phase out of their remaining uses," says Greg Kidd, Science and Legal

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Policy Director with Beyond Pesticides. "The fact is that there are currently available alternatives to most, if not all, applications for chemically treated wood, making CCA, penta and creosote obsolete." The alternative technologies include recycled steel, composite plastics and concrete. "All of the alternatives last longer than treated wood, do not require costly retreatment and do not leach toxic wood preservatives into the environment," points out Mr. Kidd. A feasibility study, conducted in cooperation between the principle users of treated wood products and the manufacturers of alternatives, would be the first step towards phasing in the use of the alternative technologies.

Some utilities and local governments have started to move away from the use of treated wood products. Florida Power & Light has incorporated some concrete poles into their inventory. The San Francisco Planning and Policy Committee of the Commission on the Environment adopted a resolution on March 22, 2001 urging Pacific Gas & Electric and Pacific Bell to conduct a feasibility study for the use of alternatives to treated wood utility poles. The study is to be conducted with manufacturers of non-wood utility poles. The resolution also calls for a plan for the safe disposal of discarded wood poles.

The EPA is currently in the process of reregistering CCA, penta and creosote to determine appropriate regulatory action given the known hazards from exposure to these chemicals. EPA originally stated that the reregistration process would be complete in 1998, the latest information from the agency has the process being completed in 2003 – five years late and counting. The agency is coming under increasing pressure to reconsider some of the regulations last imposed on these chemicals back in the mid-1980s. For example, Senator Bill Nelson (D-FL) wrote to the Administrator of EPA on March 29, 2001 asking her to expedite the reregistration of CCA and consider whether mandatory consumer warnings should be required for arsenic-treated wood. Meanwhile, people continue to be exposed to these chemicals.

Penta, CCA and creosote have been tied to a large number of health problems including cancer, birth defects, kidney and liver damage and death. Penta, classified as a probable carcinogen in its own right, is contaminated with dioxins. The National Institutes of Health recently classified dioxin as a known human carcinogen. Both arsenic and chromium (VI) are known carcinogens. Creosote is actually a toxic soup containing dioxins and various polycyclic hydrocarbons. All of the wood preservatives have been shown to leach out of treated wood.