

NCAMP PRESS RELEASE

Beyond Pesticides/National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides

701 E Street, SE, Washington DC 20003
202-543-5450 (*voice*), 202-543-4791 (*fax*)
ncamp@beyondpesticides.org

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Contact: Jay Feldman
or Greg Kidd
202-543-5450

New EPA Data Released Under Freedom of Information Act Find High Cancer Risk Tied to Wood Utility Poles Treated with Poisonous Chemicals

EPA Study Raises Seriousness of Public Health Risk

Public Interest Survey Shows Utilities Fail to Use Safe Alternative Poles

Washington, DC, December 16, 1999 - Children exposed to soil around utility poles treated with pentachlorophenol (penta), a wood preservative commonly used in pole treatment, face a risk of cancer 220 times higher than the Environmental Protection Agency's acceptable level, according to an EPA preliminary review obtained through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request and being released today for the first time by Beyond Pesticides/National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides. The data means that two children born each day are pre-destined to contracting cancer from this exposure alone.

Still, every year, millions of new wood utility poles treated with penta and other dangerous chemicals are put in the yards of homes and along highways across the United States. Millions more poles are slathered with the same chemical by utility workers in attempts to ward off rot and insects. There are an estimated 130 million wood poles currently in use in the U.S.

Beyond Pesticides/National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides (NCAMP) recently sent a survey to more than 3,000 utilities in the U.S. and Canada to learn more about the use, storage and disposal of wood poles. The American Wood Preservers Institute (AWPI) launched a campaign against the survey, urging utilities not to cooperate. Even so, NCAMP was able to obtain responses from utilities with distribution in 24 states and Canada, controlling nearly one million poles.

The survey shows that 69 percent of utility companies give away or sell to the public poles taken out of service. "I think it is fair to say that we are shocked to learn how the utilities dispose of their old poles," said Jay Feldman, executive director of Beyond Pesticides/NCAMP.

One company received an award for donating and converting the contaminated wood into such things as outdoor classrooms and bird boxes. Another gives their old poles away along

with a Material Safety Data Sheet. The MSDS points out that penta "has been found to have toxic effects in laboratory animals," that exposure should be avoided "during pregnancy" and that penta treated wood can "cause irritation to the eyes and respiratory system." That same utility includes a contract that holds the utility "harmless from liability for future use or storage of said poles," according to the report.

"The utility industry has been aware of the danger of these chemicals for decades. They refuse, however to use alternative poles -like steel, composites or concrete- that are safer, stronger and cheaper to use in the long run," according to Mr. Feldman.

The survey indicated that 1.5 percent of utility poles are made from alternative materials. "I could understand the utility companies' refusal to change if they did not have a choice, but they do have choices; and they are economical," said Mr. Jay Feldman.

"None of the utilities that responded had more than a small fraction of alternative poles in their inventory. Also, none of the utilities were seriously considering alternatives. In short, it appears that some utilities are taking small steps towards change, but not even one utility in the entire United States is willing to be a leader and look for newer, better ways to protect their customers and the environment," Mr. Feldman said.

"What these companies are doing is burying their heads in the sand. Dozens of sites where the poles have been treated have become Superfund sites. Also, the utilities store thousands of wood poles at their yards, creating more contamination. And then, instead of properly destroying the old poles when they take them out of service, they give them away to unsuspecting farmers and homeowners who do not know the risk of handling or cutting the poles. The whole thing is rather dangerous," Mr. Feldman said.

EPA has undertaken a broad reevaluation of pentachlorophenol, creosote and copper chromium arsenate (CCA), the most commonly used wood pole preservatives. These chemicals can cause cancer, birth defects, blood diseases and nervous system disorders. Penta contains dioxin, furans and hexachlorobenzene, all highly toxic contaminants. EPA is now considering whether penta should be banned as it already is in 26 countries.

Key findings from the utility survey are:

- 98.5 percent of utility poles in service are chemically treated. 1.5 percent are alternative materials.
- 34 percent of the utilities surveyed retreat their utility poles with fresh chemicals during the poles' service life.
- 85 percent of the utilities store chemically treated wood poles on site.
- 69 percent of utilities responding to the survey give away or sell wood to the public preservative-treated poles taken out of service.
- Only one survey respondent distributes a Material Safety Data Sheet on the hazards of penta with the treated wood poles being sold or given away to the public.
- 18 percent of utilities surveyed dispose of treated poles in local municipal landfills

■ Only five percent of respondents consider wood preservative treated wood poles taken out of service as hazardous waste and dispose of them accordingly.

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