

# V.

## Conclusions & Recommendations

**D**espite warnings about their hazards, widespread contamination, levels in human body tissue and fluids, extreme effects on workers and special risks to children, pentachlorophenol and the other wood preservatives have escaped the regulation necessary to adequately protect public health and the environment. The latest EPA science review and recent findings on dioxin contamination associated with penta and treated utility poles calls for a break with the history of special interest politics that has allowed the continued use of wood preservatives. They can be economically replaced by safer alternative pole materials, such as steel, concrete and composite or by burying lines.

Wood preservatives, used to treat millions of utility poles across the country, pose a serious threat to public health and the environment. Wood preservatives constitute the single largest pesticide use in the United States, accounting for nearly one billion pounds annually. The chemicals, used widely to extend the life of wood products, including over 130 million utility poles, contain some of the most hazardous toxic contaminants on the market. The chemicals include pentachlorophenol, creosote, arsenic and chromium VI and contaminants such as dioxin, furans and hexachlorobenzene. The sole purpose of these chemicals is to preserve wood by killing insects, bacteria and fungus.

Penta leaves a toxic trail, which includes the production of wood utility poles, and their retreatment, storage and disposal. There are at least 795 wood preserving facilities across the country and hundreds of Superfund hazardous waste sites that are contaminated with penta. Treated poles continue to pollute after they are taken out of service and used as fence posts, bird houses, outdoor classrooms, or other building material.

Beyond Pesticides/NCAMP's Poison Poles Campaign began with the development and distribution of *Poison Poles: Their Toxic Trail and the Safer Alternatives*. *Poison Poles* successfully brought the issue of the widespread contamination and poisoning from the use of wood preser-

vatives on utility poles and availability of alternatives in front of utility industry executives and decision makers, environmental regulators, consumer activists, utility regulators and the general public.

With an eye toward the EPA's current reevaluation of the wood preservatives, starting with penta, Beyond Pesticides/NCAMP recognized the importance of following up *Poison Poles* with a survey of utility companies. The survey has provided real world numbers with which to measure the EPA's risk assessment of penta. What has been discovered is alarming.

Utility companies, in general, prefer penta treated wood utility poles to any other type according to survey results. Most utility companies store treated wood utility poles on site. These stored poles represent large, concentrated reservoirs of penta, and other wood preservatives, that leach out of the poles into soil and ground water. Many utility companies retreat their aging stock of wood poles to increase their lifespan. Retreating wood poles provides a fresh source of penta to contaminate our environment and our bodies.

Most alarming is the majority of utility companies that give away or sell their used treated wood poles to the public. The unsuspecting handy-person that cuts the treated poles to size brings the highly toxic penta and its deadly contaminants into even more intimate contact with the public.

The EPA has determined that penta and its contaminants do leach out of treated wood utility poles. The EPA has noted that dioxins in treated wood appear to be the largest quantified flow of dioxins into the environment. The EPA calculated cancer risks for children as a result of their ex-

posure to penta. The agency found that children face a risk of cancer that is 220 times higher than levels deemed acceptable from exposure to soil contaminated with penta treated wood poles; the same penta treated wood poles that are planted in countless neighborhoods across the country.

EPA recognizes that the unfortunate people that are exposed to penta on the job face an astronomically high risk of cancer. The most shocking example is the risk faced by people retreating wood poles with liquid penta; according to the EPA, they have a 100 percent chance of getting cancer.

What has emerged since the survey was launched in Summer 1999 is the wood treatment and utility industries' unwillingness to have a public debate on key issues that affect public health and environmental safety. The American Wood Preservers Institute's efforts to stop the free flow of information to the public on basic utility industry practices, as evidenced by its president's memo telling utilities not to cooperate with the survey, raises serious concerns about what the industry has to hide. The new EPA assessments of extraordinarily high risk associated with penta-treated utility poles seem to shed light on why they want public debate stopped. Pentachlorophenol and its contaminants have poisoned and contaminated long enough. The industry knows this.

What will it take to reduce and eliminate this human health and environmental threat? It will take an active public to push for the adoption of alternatives and a more aggressive regulatory climate to provide improved protection of public health and the environment. It will take EPA breaking with its history and it will take a cultural shift on the part of the utility industry.

## **Taking Action**

### **What people and community groups can do:**

In order to begin a dialogue with local and regional utility companies, Beyond Pesticides/NCAMP developed the survey discussed in this report. (See Appendix B) The survey questions utility companies on their utility pole practices.

- Contact your local utility and arrange for a meeting with

the chief executive officer.

- Ask that the survey be completed. If you cannot get a meeting, mail the survey. (See Appendix F)
- Present the findings of *Pole Pollution* and *Poison Poles*.
- Make a formal request that the utility consider and adopt a policy to stop purchasing treated wood poles and begin purchasing the alternatives.
- Ask for a response by a specific date.
- Begin a community drive for the changes you are requesting if the utility is unresponsive.
- Circulate a petition to community and civic organizations, through religious institutions, school groups and local environmental and social groups to generate support for changes.
- Enlist local leaders, such as politicians, clergy, educators and others.
- Identify wood preservative problems in your community or nearby communities.
- Notify the local media (newspaper, television and radio) about the campaign, the survey and your concerns.
- Hold a public forum and invite the community and engage the utilities in debate on the subject.

## **Contact EPA**

Tell EPA to remove pentachlorophenol from the market because it is no longer needed. Write Carol Browner, Administrator, EPA, 401 M Street, SW, Washington, DC 20460.

## **Contact Beyond Pesticides/NCAMP for More Information**

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