

Fact Sheet on Chemically Treated Wood Utility Poles

- Wood preservatives used to chemically treat wood utility poles contain dangerous chemicals, including dioxins, which harm human health and the environment. The last legal remaining use of pentachlorophenol (penta) is as a wood preservative in utility poles.
- There are approximately 135 million chemically treated wood utility poles in the U.S. Three percent of these poles are replaced annually.
- Wood preservatives account for nearly one-third of the 2.4 billion pounds of pesticides annually used in the U.S. Nearly 600 million cubic feet of wood poles (approx. four million poles) are treated with these chemicals each year.
- The three major chemical wood preservatives are pentachlorophenol (penta), creosote, and arsenicals (copper chromium arsenate, or CCA). A fourth, copper naphthenate, is considered an alternative.
- Chemical treating of wood poles is one of the last remaining uses of penta and creosote – 43% of all poles are treated with penta; 42% of all poles are treated with arsenic; and 13% are still treated with creosote.
- The use of penta is prohibited in 26 countries around the world, but not in the United States.
- Penta and its contaminants, dioxin, furans, and hexochlorobenzene are considered the United Nations Environmental Program to be persistent organic pollutants (POPs). These contaminants are restricted under the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants signed by the United States in 2001.
- Wood preservatives are ranked among the most potent cancer agents. They are also promoters of birth defects, reproductive problems and nervous system toxicants. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) assigned a cancer risk 3.4 million times higher than acceptable for people that apply penta to poles in the field, according to EPA's draft science chapter on penta that was released in 1999.
- There are at least 795 wood preserving plants in the U.S. whose operations and waste products are not adequately regulated.
- In 1984, EPA issued a standard to limit dioxin contamination in penta to 1 part per million (ppm). In 1986, under pressure from the chemical industry, lead by the sole producer of penta in the U.S., Vulcan Chemical Co., EPA agreed to raise the dioxin levels by 4 times to 4 ppm. in some cases. This issue has not been revisited since 1986.
- The wood preserving industries strive to deny and avoid the cost and potential liability of the disposal of treated poles. A Beyond Pesticides/NCAMP study found that more than 60% of utilities regularly give away poles taken out of service. Given EPA's concern for residential exposure this practice may have to stop.
- Poles made of alternative materials, such as recycled steel, concrete, composite, or the burying of lines, are all alternatives to wood poles that currently are used. The salvage value of steel poles contrasts sharply with the disposal costs of treated wood utility poles.
- In 2001, the European Union severely restricted the sales and use of creosote after an EU scientific committee concluded from a recent study that creosote has a greater potential to cause cancer than previously thought.
- In February 2002, EPA released for comment a preliminary agreement with the three major manufactures of CCA to end manufacturing of wood preserved with CCA for residential use by the end of December 2003. As of February 2003 the final agreement had not been released.
- January 2003, the European Union announced a ban on all but a restricted number of industrial uses of CCA.
- In February 2003, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission announced that it found that that some children may face an increased risk of developing lung or bladder cancer over their lifetime from playing on playground equipment made from CCA pressure-treated wood. This risk is in addition to the risk of getting cancer due to other factors over one's lifetime.

Beyond Pesticides/National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides
701 E Street, SE, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20003
www.beyondpesticides.org