

Statement of
Jay Feldman, Executive Director
Beyond Pesticides/National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides
on
Utility Pole Pollution

Raleigh, NC
March 16, 2000

I am Jay Feldman, Executive Director of the Beyond Pesticides/National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides (Beyond Pesticides/NCAMP). Founded in 1981, Beyond Pesticides/NCAMP is a national grassroots coalition of organizations and individuals dedicated to a reduction and, where possible, elimination of toxic pesticide hazards. I am the co-author of the recently released report *Pole Pollution*. I also co-authored an earlier report, *Poison Poles, Their Toxic Trail and the Safer Alternatives*. Both of these reports address the risks to human and environmental health caused by the chemicals used in treated wood utility poles.

We are here to release the report *Pole Pollution* and launch a public awareness and advocacy campaign to end the use of the set of pesticides used as chemical preservatives in the treatment of wood utility poles.

Since the middle of the last century, we have seen a huge increase in the number and use of chemical pesticides of all kinds. Periodically, our country has recognized the need to ban commonly used pesticides because of the dangers they posed to people and the environment. DDT, for example, after being widely used for years, was prohibited in 1972 because of its deadly effects on both people and wildlife. Agent Orange and PCBs are other good examples. It is time for the wood preserving pesticides which are, frankly obsolete, to join the ranks of these notorious chemicals.

Today, wood preservatives are the most widely used and dangerous pesticides in the United States. To reduce the use of these chemicals, we are calling on responsible utilities that operate in the state of North Carolina and throughout this country to begin utilizing utility poles made out of materials that are safer for the environment and human health, materials such as recycled steel, cement and composite.

Why focus on utility poles?

One of the most widely used pole treatment chemicals is pentachlorophenol, or penta. It is both a cancer causing chemical and a nervous system poison. Similarly hazardous is another pole treatment chemical, copper chromium arsenate, which contains salts of copper, chromium, arsenic and other contaminants, including lead. These chemicals also cause cancer, nervous system damage, as well as reproductive effects.

With more than five million poles, North Carolina ranks third in the nation for the number of utility poles in use. We estimate that more than two million of these poles are treated with penta. The rest are treated with copper chromium arsenate and creosote.

A utility pole treated with penta and other wood preservatives, whether in your yard, on a playground, or along a public thoroughfare, is, by itself, a mini-toxic waste site. The preservatives used to treat poles are not made from a single chemical. In reality, each is a toxic soup made from a combination of chemicals whose effects are synergistic. That means that the toxicity of all of the ingredients acting together is greater than the sum of the effects when each chemical is considered separately.

For example, penta contains three particularly deadly chemicals – dioxins, furans and hexachlorobenzene. Dioxins by themselves produce a spectrum of toxic effects. A review of the literature shows that exposure to dioxins causes damage to the nervous and immune systems, as well as skin, urinary, liver, pancreatic and respiratory disorders. For these reasons, penta is the most hazardous of the wood preservatives. In fact, the EPA has found that utility poles treated with penta are the single largest reservoir of dioxins in North Carolina and the country.

EPA is still in the process of factoring in all the risks associated with the three major contaminants of penta. However, even without that information, recent data from EPA has calculated that children playing around utility poles face a risk of cancer that is as high as 220 times the average. The EPA has also determined that workers exposed to penta face certain cancer. Because of the hazards linked to penta and its contaminants, 26 countries around the world have completely banned its use.

Copper chromium arsenate (CCA) is composed of copper, chromium VI and arsenic. Although all the active ingredients are toxic to a broad range of organisms, the effects are mostly dominated by the arsenic component. EPA classifies arsenic as a known human carcinogen. Its ingestion or inhalation has been reported to increase the risk of cancer, especially in the liver, bladder,

kidney and lung. It disrupts the nervous system and suppresses the immune system and increases fetal mortality in test animals.

About 300 chemicals have been identified in coal-tar creosote, and there may be 10,000 other chemicals present in the mixture. The major chemicals in coal-tar creosote that can cause harmful health effects are polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, phenol, and cresols. Creosote has been linked to cancer and endocrine system disruption because of its ingredients benzo(a)pyrene and higher phenols.

The utility pole in your yard is only the tip of the iceberg.

To assess the total impact of wood preservatives on North Carolina, you need to look at the total production process from pole treatment to disposal.

First, let's look at pole treatment and the known contamination already caused by treatment chemicals. There are 67 toxic waste Superfund sites in North Carolina, four contain penta, 18 contain arsenic and three contain creosote.

The Cape Fear Wood Preserving plant in Fayetteville, NC is an excellent example of what can go wrong. That plant operated for almost 30 years until it was closed in 1983. More than 2,000 people live around that site.

It was designated as a Superfund site because wood preservatives had contaminated the soil, groundwater and surface water with creosote, copper, chromium and arsenic. Remediation at Cape Fear has been going on for 23 years and is still not completed. There is no way to quantify the total damage that has occurred to people and the environment as a result of this facility or the 31 others that are still in operation in North Carolina.

Second, consider pole storage. Poles are stockpiled at both treatment plants and in the storage yards of utility companies. A typical facility may contain hundreds, if not thousands, of poles. Each pole contains approximately 40 pounds of preservative. Therefore, a pile of 5,000 poles will contain approximately 200,000 pounds of penta that can leach from the poles and migrate into the soil. Studies show that arsenic leaches out of treated wood. Arsenic has been found in soil around treated wood at levels that were two to four times greater than EPA guidance levels.

A study of nine storage sites by Bell Canada found that groundwater and surface soil concentrations of wood preservative chemicals were two to 10 times greater than Provincial clean-up criteria. At another ten sites, concentrations were found to be 100 times higher than acceptable standards.

Third, you should take into account the reuse of poles when they are taken out of service. The rules say that old poles should be treated as waste and have no additional human exposure. A Beyond Pesticides/NCAMP survey of utility companies found utilities, as a matter of practice, allow the poles taken out of service to be reused as fence posts, milled lumber, and in gardens. In one case, contaminated poles were reused for outdoor classrooms and bird boxes.

Science findings.

Beyond Pesticides/NCAMP recently obtained an EPA preliminary risk review of penta. The data in this review makes it clear that the use of this chemical is no longer acceptable. Since 93% of all penta is used for pole treatment, ending its use for this purpose would essentially eliminate penta's further contamination of the environment.

Even in the face of extensive research, there are those who say that we and others are making mountains out of molehills. For example, some in the chemical industry have asked, "How many kids go around eating the dirt around utility poles." What they fail to mention is that widespread penta contamination is clearly documented. One scientific study performed in Arkansas found that 100% of children tested carry penta in their body fluids. Another study conducted in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan found that 100% of the people tested had penta in their urine. If 93% of penta is used to treat wood poles, the only logical conclusion is that these poles are the principal source of the contamination.

Wood preservatives are the largest group of pesticides used in North Carolina and the United States. By conservative standards, they account for one-third of all pesticide use. However, a review of the data shows that their use could be greater than a billion pounds, more than all other conventional pesticide uses combined.

There is no longer a question that the chemicals used to treat wood cause cancer, birth defects, impair the immune system and cause the death of unborn babies. Their continued use is due largely to a powerful wood preserving and chemical industry that has stymied the scientific review process at the Environmental Protection Agency. Plus, I should add that, there has been very little attention paid to this problem and neither the public nor the press is aware of the risk these chemicals present. And, the utilities that use the treated poles are generally powerful companies that are in the habit of getting their way and ponderously slow to accept change.

Let's put the risk from treated utility poles in context.

The continued use of chemically treated wood poles in North Carolina represents a serious, but avoidable, public health and environmental threat from many perspectives.

For those people who try to play down the risks from treated utility poles, I can only remind them that these poles are the primary means of spreading some of the worst cancer causing materials known. Moving from one wood preservative to another equally toxic wood preservative --from penta to CCA, for example-- is not the answer to this problem.

There are utility poles on the market made from alternative materials, such as recycled steel, concrete and composite, that are much safer than chemically treated wood. The bottom line is that we do not need to add more hazardous chemicals to the environment at a time when one in four people in the U.S. dies prematurely from cancer.

Recommendations.

It is our recommendation that the utilities in North Carolina:

One -- Stop the purchase of treated utility poles and begin to purchase poles constructed out of safer alternative materials such as recycled steel, concrete or composite. This step can be taken without disruption of service and will actually save the utility companies and the consumers money.

Two -- Develop policies to protect workers, the public and the environment from additional exposure to penta and other similarly dangerous wood preservatives; and

Three --Stop the sale or give-away of discarded treated wood poles for public use.

The public and the regulatory process.

Today's activities are only a single step in our effort to involve the utilities, the public and the regulators in the effort to end the use of these deadly chemicals. We hope that the utilities will act on their own, voluntarily, to make the necessary changes. They have the resources at their fingertips to do what needs to be done.

North Carolina's utilities have the opportunity to start now to protect their customers and future generations. We urge them to immediately take responsible action.

We also want to encourage energy customers to demand their utilities to take action. Each time you pass a utility pole remember that every day, year in

and year out, that pole is leaching deadly, cancer-causing chemicals into the soil and water. There are already more than five million of these poles in North Carolina. Ask yourself and your utility why we have to have more.

If you need additional information about the risks of chemically treated wood utility poles you can go to the Beyond Pesticides/NCAMP website at www.beyondpesticides.org.

For our part, we will be doing everything possible to make the regulatory process work. EPA should find that the continued risks associated with wood preservatives is unreasonable in light of the scientific data and the availability of alternatives to treated wood poles. The agency can and should cancel all uses of penta and other wood preservatives with similar effects.

Purely and simply, it is time for the United States to join the other 26 countries around the globe that have banned penta. Let's put penta in the history books along with DDT, PCBs and Agent Orange.