

VIEWPOINT: Using Common Sense with Treated Wood

Is it environmentally safe?
by John Culp

The wood treating industry has undergone changes in the past two decades. Alternative methods of construction have posed competition, economic recessions have threatened, and controversies have arisen regarding access to adequate supplies of timber to treat.

The most significant wood treating event during the past 20 years, has been the growth of the environmental movement and the sweeping (and often uncritical) application of its commendable tenets throughout commerce and industry. As I travel throughout parts of the United States, consulting with architects and engineers, the question I most often encounter regarding treated wood is, "But is it environmentally safe?" This is a rational and worthy question, but all too often the information-seeker has already reached the conclusion that it is not. Additionally, some of the architects and engineers I speak with regarding treated wood have unwittingly developed the preconceived notion that any wood impregnated with chemicals becomes a hazardous substance.

Our chemical-conscious society often fails to make the distinction between the chemical itself, which is admittedly developed with the aim of eliminating fungi, insects, marine borers, and other undesirable inhabitants, and the wood that is infused with the chemical. Pressure treated "fixes" the chemical into the very fibers of the wood and becomes a safety issue only when the wood is machined or burned. Simple, safe, and common-sense handling precautions should then be taken, in accordance with well established U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) guidelines.

Wood-treating chemicals themselves have a long and relatively innocuous history. Creosote, for example, is really nothing more than the liquid portion of coal, and its coal tar derivatives are found in unregulated abundance throughout the marketplace - in the buttons on your shirt and in the dandruff shampoos you buy at the drugstore. Koppers Company experiments have found creosote to have a moderately low toxicity; about half again as toxic as common table salt. The city of Seattle has received much of its drinking water for many decades through two wood-staved aqueducts treated with creosote.

Waterborne preservative, or arsenicals, cannot help but bring to mind images of

When you don't ask for help, you're asking for trouble

Editor's Note: The following letter was written to an insurance company following the author's on-the-job accident. The author is anonymous.

I am writing in response to your request for more information concerning Block #11 on the insurance form, which asks for "cause of injuries" and wherein I put "trying to do the job alone." You said you needed more information, so I trust the following will be sufficient.

I am a bricklayer by trade, and on the date of injuries I was working alone laying brick around the top of a four-story building when I realized that I had about 500 pounds of brick left over. Rather than carry the bricks down by hand, I decided to put them into a barrel and lower them by a pulley that was fastened to the top of the building. I secured the end of the rope at ground level and went up to the top of the building and loaded the bricks into the barrel and swung the barrel out with the bricks in it. I then went down and untied the rope, holding it securely to ensure the slow decent of the barrel.

As you will note on Block #6 of the insurance form, I weigh 145 pounds. Due to my shock at being jerked off the ground so swiftly, I lost my presence of mind and forgot to let go of the rope. Between the second and third floors I met the barrel coming down. This accounts for the bruises and lacerations on my upper body.

Regaining my presence of mind, I held

tightly to the rope and proceeded rapidly up the side of the building, not stopping until my right hand was jammed in the pulley. This accounts for the broken thumb.

Despite the pain, I retained my presence of mind and held tightly to the rope. At approximately the same time, however, the barrel of bricks hit the ground and the bottom fell out of the barrel. Devoid of the weight of the bricks, the barrel now weighed about 50 pounds. I again refer you to Block #6 and my weight.

As you would guess, I began a rapid descent. In the vicinity of the second floor I met the barrel coming up. This explains the injuries to my legs and lower body. Slowed only slightly, I continued my decent, landing on the pile of bricks. Fortunately, my back was only sprained, and the internal injuries were minimal.

I am sorry to report, however, that at this point I finally lost presence of mind and let go of the rope, and as you can imagine, the empty barrel crashed down on me.

I trust this answers your concern. Please know that I am finished trying to do the job alone. How about you?

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murderous octogenarians clad in equally old lace. But I am told that arsenic is ubiquitous in the environment. It is found in seawater and in the seafood that we consume, particularly shrimp and cod. All soils have some concentration of indigenous arsenic; the state of Alaska has the highest levels.

All chemicals used in wood-preservation treatment have been exhaustively tested by the EPA, which has issued a set of useful and appropriate guidelines for the use of treated wood. These guidelines are available from the EPA or the Western Wood Preservers Institute upon request. Any prudent discussion of treated wood should include some consideration of its alternatives, and the environmental price we pay for using them. There is no energy source that is free of environmental hazard, whether it is air-polluting fossil fuels or wild-life endangering hydroelectric power. Timber, on the other hand, is a primary and renewable resource. Extending its life through pressure treatment is a responsible act of

conservation. For those who advocate the use of nontreated, so-called "naturally resistant," species of cedar and redwood, I would encourage reading Bjorn Hausen's *Woods Injurious to Human Health: A Manual*. You might be surprised to discover the confirmed health problems associated with exposures to Western red cedar and redwood sawdust and shavings.

In closing, many scientific sources of information on the environment compatibility of treated wood are available through the Western Wood Preservers Institute and other sources. I see my advocacy role for the use of pressure-treated wood products as carrying an equal responsibility of education. The best advice I can offer a prospective customer is the application of liberal amounts of an expensive yet often overlooked commodity: common sense.

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