

Proposed sealant ban based on faulty research

ANNE P. LEHURAY • JANUARY 16, 2010

The city of Springfield is under pressure to ban the use of refined coal tar-based sealants on parking lots and other expanses of pavement within the city. To date, the arguments put forward in favor of such a ban have been based on bad science and supposition. We urge the city government to take a much closer look at the science -- and non-science -- involved in this debate before making such an expensive and potentially destructive decision.

Very little scientific research has been conducted on refined coal tar-based sealant runoff in urban areas. In Austin, Texas, the first community where the product was banned, the decision was based on a single, questionable study. That single study ignored almost all other sources of pollution, ensuring that only sealant was blamed. The city of Austin decided to institute the ban even though the federal U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry concluded that there is no apparent public health hazard in the Barton Springs location, where repeated exposure to sealant runoff was found to occur. A study of that location in Austin before and then several years after the city banned the use of the sealants found no discernible difference in either the amount or types of compounds discovered in the before-and-after samples.

In short, and contrary to reports in the media, there is no proof that these specific products pose a threat to human health, even when they are present in a particular environment. And there is no evidence that banning use of the sealants would lead to detectable differences in the amounts of these compounds in the environment. But there is solid evidence that refined coal-tar-based sealants pose a negligible risk to human health in normal use.

The product has been in use for 50 years, yet members of the Pavement Coatings Technology Council have not noted unusual health effects in the work force exposed to these specific products. Certainly, if this product was as toxic as the alarmists claim, those who have worked with it daily would have been harmed.

What we do know about this proposed ban is its potential expense. Use of refined coal tar-based sealants significantly extends the life of asphalt pavement. Banning the sealants will, then, significantly increase the cost of parking-lot and other pavement maintenance in the community of Springfield, for no demonstrable reason. It will increase the costs to schools, hospitals and any other public facility with a parking lot. In the retail sector, it will increase the cost of doing business in Springfield, and that cost will inevitably be passed on to consumers.

Members of the Springfield City Council would be well-advised to take a careful look at what is happening here, and ask themselves if their city and its residents will really benefit from becoming a test case for an environmentally dubious and scientifically non-proven experiment. For more information, please see www.truthaboutcoal tar.com.

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