

HEALTH ALERT!

BURNING OF RAIL SLEEPERS



During maintenance and upgrading works on rail tracks in eastern Australia unserviceable timber rail sleepers are regularly replaced by concrete sleepers or new timber sleepers. Regrettably, some of the old timber sleepers from this track maintenance work are being offered for sale as firewood.

The Firewood Association of Australia Inc. (FAA) is the peak representative body for the Australian commercial firewood industry. The FAA has long since banned the sale of old rail sleepers by its members for the following reasons:

1. **Used railway sleepers contain asbestos.** Even though asbestos train brake linings were phased out in the mid 1980's, many old sleepers pre-date this time. Microscopic fibres from the asbestos brake linings can become trapped in cracks on the surface of timber sleepers. As long as they are not disturbed they do not present a hazard, but if the sleepers are burnt, the deadly asbestos fibres will be released. These fibres will collect and concentrate in the ash in the bottom of a fireplace, heater or wood oven and they can easily become airborne and inhaled. There is no safe level of exposure to asbestos fibres. The impact of inhaling these asbestos fibres, which can result in the asbestos specific lung cancer mesothelioma, may not be known for many years after exposure.



2. **All used railway sleepers are contaminated to some extent with herbicides, lead and other heavy metals, plus grease and oil.** When used railway sleepers are heated, these toxic substances are vaporised, releasing odours and toxic fumes. These fumes will be absorbed by any food cooked with the wood, for example in pizza ovens, barbecues etc. When these noxious fumes escape from the heater/fire into the room they have been known to cause respiratory health problems such as asthma, bronchial inflammation eye irritation and rhinitis. Foul odours from fires burning old sleepers are commonly reported by wood fire users themselves as well as their neighbours.

3. **Small stones from the track ballast become stuck in used sleepers.** When heated in a fire these small stones can explode, creating an eye injury hazard in an open fire or cracking the glass of a slow combustion heater.

Even though our members do not sell this product, they are concerned about the serious health impacts that this dangerous product can have on the owners of wood fires and their neighbours.

We believe that local and state governments should actively alert the public to the danger of burning old sleepers and ensure that this hazardous product is not permitted to be sold as firewood.

If you have any questions concerning this matter please do not hesitate to contact the FAA on 1300 131 481 or by email info@firewood.asn.au.