

Support for HB 553

Environment and Transportation Committee

Two years ago, while researching water quality, my students learned about a highly toxic substance that could be found everywhere in our neighborhoods: coal tar sealants. They discovered that coal tar sealants - which are applied to driveways, parking lots, and blacktops to extend the life of asphalt and make them aesthetically pleasing - contain polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), which are known carcinogens. At the time, coal tar sealants were already banned in two Maryland counties, and they wondered why they were not banned where we lived. So, the students joined forces with a local councilman, and after months of research and presenting to decision-makers, they successfully advocated for a ban on coal tar sealants in Howard County. At that time, they were in fifth grade. Since then, the students and I have come to learn even more about the dangers of coal tar sealants, and that is why we strongly support a state ban on coal tar sealants in Maryland.

Coal tar is tremendously harmful to human health and the environment as it contains 16 PAHs that are classified as toxic by key environmental and health agencies. The International Agency for Research on Cancer and the World Health Organization consider PAHs in coal tar sealants as Group 1 carcinogens, which means they are carcinogenic to humans. The National Toxicology Program classifies PAHs as “known to cause cancer.” The Environmental Protection Agency classifies them as Group A carcinogens, meaning they are carcinogenic to humans. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention classify PAHs in coal tar sealants as Occupational Carcinogens. The European Union classifies coal tar sealants as hazardous waste. The National Cancer Institute, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry have all found that exposure to PAHs increases the chances of skin, lung, bladder, kidney, and stomach cancer in both humans and animals. These agencies confirm that PAHs are toxic to people and the environment, including fish and aquatic life. When benthic organisms are exposed to large amounts of PAHs, they can experience loss of consciousness, inability to reproduce, and death. The loss of bottom dwellers can disrupt the entire aquatic food chain. A ban on coal tar sealants is crucial to reduce exposure to PAHs, thereby protecting human and aquatic health.

PAHs in coal tar can spread anywhere easily. When it rains or snows, coal tar particles on driveway and parking lot surfaces runoff into stormwater drains. This means that PAHs are in our water supply, as well as our ponds, rivers, and the Chesapeake Bay. Vehicle tires pick up coal tar dust through adhesion, making it airborne. Wind blows PAH dust and particles about, contaminating the air we breathe. People can track coal tar into their homes on their shoes, which is most dangerous to innocent children, who crawl on the floor and place their fingers in their mouths.

The coal tar industry claims its products are safe, however, the safety data sheets they are required by law to provide for their products clearly identify coal tar sealants as carcinogenic. Asphalt and latex-based sealants are the alternatives to coal tar. They work just as well, cost about the same as coal tar sealants, and are widely available. In fact, national hardware stores Home Depot and Lowes voluntarily refuse to sell coal tar sealants due to

environmental concerns. If the coal tar industry and those that sell its products know it is not safe, then the next step should be to ban coal tar sealants altogether.

Maryland must lead the nation and join Washington state, Maine, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Washington, D.C. in banning coal tar sealants. Currently, forty-five percent of Maryland residents in Anne Arundel, Howard, Montgomery, and Prince George's counties are protected from toxic PAHs under local coal tar bans, so why not ban it in the whole state? As seventh graders, and the future of Maryland, my students want our leaders to vote for House Bill 553 and Senate Bill 730 and ban coal tar sealants to protect citizens and the environment. As their teacher and someone who has dedicated her life to the instruction and well-being of young people, it is critical that adults take their concerns seriously and act on this ban to protect those in our care.

Signed,
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