



Dear Editor

We note with interest an article by Mark Saunders in the Weekly Times of 12th May about old rail track sleepers being offered for sale as firewood. While this may appear to be a good use for sleepers that are no good for landscape purposes, the Firewood Association of Australia Inc (FAA) does not permit its members to sell them as firewood. The FAA has banned the sale of used railway sleepers because:

1. Used railway sleepers may contain asbestos. Even though asbestos train brake linings were phased out in the early 1980's, some old sleepers may pre-date this time. Fibres from the asbestos brake linings can become trapped in cracks in the sleepers. As long as they are not disturbed they are safe, but they will be released when the sleepers are burnt. The fibres collect and concentrate in the ash in the bottom of a fireplace or heater, and they can be deadly. If anyone has burnt old sleepers in their fireplace or heater they should use and wear protective equipment when cleaning out the ash from the heater to avoid the chance of inhaling these deadly fibres. Of course not all sleepers will contain fibres, only those in sections of railway track where the trains were using their brakes. Random testing of used railway sleepers will not provide any certainty that all railway sleepers in a given batch are free from asbestos.
2. Most used railway sleepers are contaminated with grease and oil from the trains and railway track points. When used railway sleepers are burnt, these substances are burnt with them releasing odours and potentially harmful fumes. If these fumes escape from the heater/fire into the room they can cause respiratory health problems. As grease and oil will generally be located on the top surface of used sleepers, a high concentration of fumes is released when this section of the sleeper is first exposed to the fire. These fumes can generally be smelt when wood is first added to the fire, the smell dissipates as the grease and oil are burnt off. To avoid this problem, the top surface of each sleeper block could be split off and disposed of in a contaminated waste disposal facility, but this is not practical in most commercial operations.



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

Whilst all of these issues can be overcome, the random nature of the problems in used sleepers makes testing and quality control very difficult to monitor. Testing one used sleeper and finding it free from asbestos, oil, grease or ballast stones does not necessarily mean the next sleeper is likewise free from these contaminants.

It is because the FAA can not ensure a minimum safe standard for used railway sleepers that it has banned their sale by FAA Certified Firewood suppliers and re-sellers. A list of FAA Certified Firewood Suppliers is available on the association's web site www.firewood.asn.au. Information about safe and efficient operation of wood heaters can be found on the Firewood Facts page. If members of the public do choose to use old railway sleepers as firewood they should be very mindful of the inherent safety risks.

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