

BWPDA guidance on safe treatments for pallets

The recent alarm in Belgium about the safety of certain soft drinks prompted a suggestion that the problem could have been linked with treatments used on wood used to make pallets or on wooden pallets themselves which were used by the soft drinks company.

The European Commission (Consumer Safety - DG XXIV) has now published its findings after an investigation of the problem by an expert group. The report concludes that it is "highly unlikely" that the problem was linked to any chemicals on the wooden pallets. BWPDA Director Dr Chris Coggins said "The wood treatment industry has a very good record in respect of safe use and is one of the most highly regulated in Europe. It is no surprise to us that wood treatment has turned out not to be the cause of this problem".

By a wide margin, wood is a uniquely cost effective and environmentally benign material for the construction of pallets. To prevent fungal and bacterial attack and to maintain a clean appearance in a wide range of use conditions, sawn wood for pallets may be given a preservation /sanitization treatment prior to, or at the time of pallet construction. Such treatments are subject to control under national regulations and will be controlled and harmonised in the European Union in the future under the Biocidal Products Directive.

There is no known health problem associated with using pallets protected in this way but there have been occasional problems with taint of foodstuffs stored on wood treated with sanitizers based on halogenated phenols (examples of halogenated phenols include pentachlorophenol, trichlorophenol, tribromophenol). For this reason it is recommended that the use of any of these products on pallets which may be used for foodstuffs or other consumables should be avoided. As an additional precaution, and as a matter of routine industrial hygiene, pallet timbers and foodstuffs/consumables should not come into direct contact. If pallets become soiled in service and require cleaning, any sanitizing agents used should be explicitly approved for the purpose by a competent regulatory authority.

The BWPDA is working closely with PalletLink to develop clear guidance for the pallet and food industries. In addition the BWPDA is preparing a register of products approved for various purposes, for example for food contact, in the EU. The association is very well placed to maintain this register because of its work with regulatory bodies and its position as secretariat for the European Wood Preservative Manufacturers Group (EWPM).

Relevant links:

National Wooden Pallet & Container Association (USA)