

Safer Alternatives to Coal Tar Sealants

Coal tar sealants - the residue from making coke from coal that is used to seal driveways, parking lots, and roads - contain up to 35% coal tar pitch, a labeled carcinogen. As they wear, coal tar sealants emit contaminated dust which accumulates in nearby homes, leach into surrounding soil, and spread into urban lakes and streams in stormwater runoff. These contaminants are accumulating in significant enough concentrations in waterway sediments to make disposal of these sediments a problem for municipalities.

Municipalities are beginning to respond. Montgomery County, Maryland recently banned the use of coal tar sealants for driveways, parking lots, and roads, and is encouraging residents to choose safer alternatives to coal tar sealants. According to the Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection, studies have shown that when coal-tar based sealants are applied on parking lots and driveways, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), some of which are known carcinogens, can be released into nearby surface waters. The County decided to ban the use of coal tar sealants when PAHs began to show up in sufficient quantities in their sampling of streams and sediments in the county's waterways and stormwater facilities.

In addition to concern for wildlife and humans, using safer alternatives to coal tar sealants potentially avoids additional disposal costs to municipal governments, businesses, and homeowners associations charged with maintaining stormwater management facilities.

When sealing a driveway or parking lot, please take the following precautions to help protect our local streams:

1. Before using a pavement sealant, make sure that it does not contain coal tar, car tar pitch, or RT-12.
2. Choose a product that is asphalt - or latex-based. Many major chains such as Home Depot, Lowe's, and Ace Hardware, no longer sell coal tar sealants and only sell alternative products.
3. For those hiring a contractor to do the job, specify that you want them to use a product without coal tar, and ask to see the label before they use it.



Photo credit: USGS