

Lessons Learned from a Career in Wood Preservation

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In 1987, when I arrived at Wood Preservation Canada, what was then the Canadian Institute of Treated Wood, the industry was composed of approximately 65 mostly family owned treating plants across Canada. In addition, there were 7 suppliers with heavy duty wood preservative registrations.

The first Environment Canada Technical Recommendations for the Design and Operation of Wood Preservation Facilities (TRD) was completed through a consultation process in 1986. Little did I know at the time, that this document would lead our industry to the forefront in the world when considering human health and environment issues in wood treating plants.

Pesticide registrations were led by the Department of Agriculture. This would change shortly afterwards with the formation of the Pest Management Regulatory Agency, Health Canada (PMRA).

Our industry was growing rapidly with the acceptance of pressure treated wood for residential applications. Industrial/commercial applications were widely popular in more traditional markets like railway ties and utility poles.

It is of note to recognize that wood preservatives for the most part encountered little public controversy with the exception of pentachlorophenol.

The association (CITW) was made up of 40% of the treating plants operating in Canada and producing approximately 55% of the treated wood produced in Canada. Members were divided by preservative supplier and there was little interaction amongst treaters. Preservative suppliers were not united and were in fact openly critical of competing products.

We were our own worst enemy!

We had to move forward and to do so we would first need a way to break down the barriers within our own organization before we could tackle the challenges from outside. Everybody loves a party so why not start there. We held the first ever Presidents Banquet which included a casino night. It sounds simple but this was a significant stepping stone in bringing the members together. More social events were planned encouraging members to mix and mingle. The Board of Directors decided a strategic planning session was necessary for the first time to set a course for the future. We began to grow the membership and adopted a dues formula based on production.

External challenges began to arise as we approached the nineties. Creosote was coming under scrutiny by Fisheries and Oceans Canada. Rumbblings were heard about CCA and its components.

In 1992, PMRA announced the reevaluation of heavy duty wood preservatives. This was a major development for our industry as for the first time all of the preservatives were being reviewed at the same time. Furthermore, under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) some of the review work would be shared between PMRA and the U.S. Environment Protection Agency (EPA). PMRA officials estimated that the process would be completed in 5 years. Of course we now know that the process was only completed in 2012 (20 years).

Two years later in 1994, Environment Canada initiated its Strategic Options Process (SOP) and identified the wood preservation industry for review as we were identified as using Canadian Environmental Protection Act (CEPA) toxic substances namely arsenic, chrome, PAHs, dioxins and furans. This complicated an already challenging regulatory landscape.

Wood Preservation Canada asked for clarification as to how the PMRA and Environment Canada processes would proceed since both were addressing the same industry sector. Health Canada and Environment Canada required two years to come to an agreement. The PMRA reevaluation would deal with registration issues only and the Environment Canada strategic options process would cover cradle to grave without addressing product registration. The EnCan SOP was completed in July 1999.

The National Building Code of Canada, various provincial codes and municipalities often made it challenging for our industry to meet unrealistic requirements and many times unjustifiably restricted the use of our products.

The Canadian Standards Association O80 Wood Preservation standard was a challenge to keep up to date. Moving to the use category system to mirror international standards was accomplished with a great deal of hard work and dedication. To this day the technical committee is working hard to make the standard more user friendly and address the need for a consumer lumber standard.

The media has not always been a friend to our industry. Trade publications and do it yourself magazines were often complimentary and fair to the use of pressure treated wood. The news media was less kind. This was very apparent in the controversy surrounding arsenic in CCA which became the target of environmental groups in the late 90s earlier 2000s.

The alleged victims of wood preservatives while not numerous did create challenges for our industry especially when they were used by or allied to environmental groups looking for the elimination of wood treating chemicals.

Wood Preservation Canada was successful in representing the interests of treaters and suppliers largely due to strength in numbers. When we increased our representation to 98% of the industry and almost 100% of production we were a force to be reckoned with.

The Sooke Basin Study on Creosote in Aquatic Applications, the CCA transition, implementation of the TRDs on a voluntary basis through the SOP, formation of the Canadian Wood Preservation Certification Agency, completion of the reevaluation, and the success at the Stockholm Convention are all a result of working together.

It is important to acknowledge that there are many stakeholders in our industry including consumers, specifiers, builders, regulators etc.

So what did we learn over the 30 years of my time with Wood Preservation Canada:

- TRUST – developing a trust between WPC members and stakeholders especially the regulators was essential to our success

- Our industry deals with pesticides and there are many out there that would rather they disappear
- The challenges never go away they just fluctuate and recirculate over time.
- The vast majority of regulators are good people just trying to do their job. Work with them and a reasonable outcome can be expected.
- Be proactive.