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No Risk From Tire Crumb

BY BRAD PITTAM

Any time a new product is introduced, the marketplace naturally takes a close look at the safety implications—especially when the product is used in close proximity to children. That's why it's important to address the many myths surrounding recycled tire materials.

Though years of unscientific deliberation in the media have indicated otherwise, a field study by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has revealed a simple, undeniable truth: Crumb rubber derived from recycled tires is safe.

Used in a number of innovative recreation applications, including synthetic turf athletic fields and playground safety surfacing, tire crumb provides numerous technological and environmental benefits.

First, recycled rubber cushions falls, reducing injuries to athletes and children. And second, it's a low-maintenance alternative to organic material because there's no need for water, fertilizers or pesticides.

'Below Levels of Concern'

As the use of crumb rubber has become increasingly popular, the versatile and high-performance material has become the subject of unsubstantiated claims.

Media reports have indicated that parents became alarmed when their children returned home with tire crumb particles on their clothing from playgrounds and turf fields. In response, the EPA has embarked on a journey to understand the extent of crumb rubber recreational uses and determine if there is any risk from exposure—particularly to children.

Similar to the conclusions of as many as 100 state-level studies, the resulting EPA study reports that crumb rubber poses no significant health risk, nor any environmental risks.

The study was conducted by the EPA from August 2008 through October 2008 and included air and wipe samples from multiple locations in different parts of the country.

The data the EPA collected came from synthetic turf fields and playgrounds, which revealed that the concentrations of components monitored in the study were below levels of concern.

Particulate matter, metals and volatile organic compounds (VOCs) were measured in the air samples and compared with areas away from the crumb rubber, where the results were similar.

No tire-related fibers were observed in the air samples, and all air concentrations of particulate matter and lead were below levels of concern. Though lead is not native to tire rubber, trace amounts are picked up from road travel.

The amount of lead that EPA researchers found during the study was equal to or less than the amount of lead in residential floor dust. And zinc, which is a known tire additive, was found to be below levels of concern in air and surface tests.

Extractable metals from turf field blades, tire crumb materials and turf field wipe samples were low. Although there are no standards for lead in recycled tire material or synthetic turf, the average concentrations were well below the EPA standard for lead in soil and residential floor dust.

All VOCs were measured at extremely low concentrations, which is typical of ambient air.

The EPA report validates the results of continuous studies and tests conducted during the past few years.

A review of available scientific literature sponsored by the Rubber Manufacturers Association last year found no significant negative effects to health nor the environment from artificial turf made of crumb rubber. The EPA study simply adds one more volume to an increasingly large collection of information that presses the same point: Products made from recycled rubber tires are safe.

Safe and Sound

The improved function and long-lasting characteristics of recycled rubber bring unparalleled quality and performance to recreational applications. And, the use of recycled rubber provides the added benefit of environmental stewardship.

Synthetic turf fields made of crumb rubber save money and the environment by conserving as much as 50,000 gallons of water per week during the peak growing season, and by avoiding the use of dangerous herbicides and pesticides.

Recycled rubber mulch for landscaping and playground safety surfacing saves time and money by reducing the number of applications. Rubber mulch does not erode, rot or attract mold and insects. And, recycled rubber mulch saves millions of trees from the shredder.

For athletes, crumb rubber additive increases the resiliency of a field, improves drainage and enables better grass root structure. On playgrounds, a six-inch layer of rubber mulch can cushion a child's fall from as high as 12 feet—compared with six feet for wood mulch.

Though concern on the part of parents and government officials is natural, the overwhelming amount of scientific evidence expresses broad support for the EPA's conclusion that recycled rubber does not negatively affect people's health or the environment.

And the numerous benefits of recycled rubber have become indispensable.

Recreational facilities depend on innovative, high-performance products—and crumb rubber is a material that's proven reliable and proven safe.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF LTR PRODUCTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brad Pittam is the general manager of LTR Products, a Libertyville, Ill.-based subsidiary of Liberty Tire Recycling, the largest provider of tire recycling services in the United States. Pinnacle Rubber Mulch, introduced to the marketplace by LTR Products in 2009, offers a viable, eco-friendly alternative to traditional wood mulch. For more information, please visit www.pinnaclemulch.com.

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