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To the Editor:

In his recent article about refined tar-based sealants (“New doubts cast upon safety of common driveway sealants”), Michael Hawthorne tells a story unrecognizable to those familiar with the history of the product, its environmental impacts, or relevant regulations. The relatively small business community involved in the sealant industry is astonished that anyone could think they are so powerful as to have pressured the USEPA into anything, much less to have been successful.

The Tribune article focused only on incomplete – some would say biased – studies by one group of scientists even though results of other research are available. For example, the article failed to mention that a “before and after” study of the sealant ban in Austin, TX, found no change in the environmental problem – ubiquitous compounds called polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) – that the ban was promoted by activists to solve. Of course, there’s the question of whether Austin, TX actually has a problem, as the US Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry found no health risks related to PAHs in Barton Pool, mentioned prominently in the Tribune article. The article also failed to mention forensic analyses investigating whether sealants are an important source of PAHs in urban sediments, results of which do not agree with the premise that sealants are the dominant source of PAHs in Lake of the Hills, IL or other bodies of water in the U.S.

It is disappointing that a wider group of scientists were not interviewed in researching this story. Objective and thorough research might have revealed that the differentiation between PAHs in the eastern and western U.S. accepted as fact in the article is not supported by statistical analysis. Additional inquiry might have informed the reader that the “scientific evidence” for the conclusion that sealant is responsible for increased PAHs in the eastern US was nothing more than a conclusion based on the fact that more sealant is sold in the east than the west. The published story further made unwarranted comparisons between sealants and waste materials from old coal gasification plants and referenced unrelated hazards experienced by 18th century chimney sweeps in London. The article also failed to explain that concentrations which trigger “superfund” clean-ups are set for each location based on conditions that prevail at each site and have no relevance to sealants. A thorough discussion of PAHs should have included some mention of other, more dominant sources of PAHs – car exhaust, wood smoke and numerous other sources of combustion around us - as well as the fact that high concentrations of PAHs are present in medicinal products, such as dandruff shampoos and psoriasis and eczema treatments as well as in the hamburgers and vegetables we grill in our own backyards.

The absence of any effort to tell the complete story about sealants is a disappointing commentary on the state of so-called “environmental journalism” today.

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