Answers and questions about wooden sleepers.

1. Is SBB still selling wooden sleepers?

No, SBB stopped selling wooden sleepers in July 2001 as they contain certain toxic substances. All wooden sleepers are incinerated in a thermal power station in an environmentally friendly manner. (see question 4)

2. What may old wooden railway sleepers be used for?

According to the Swiss Regulation on the Reduction of Chemical Hazards, old wooden railway sleepers may only be re-used in railway tracks.

3. How must old railway sleepers be disposed of?

Old wooden railway sleepers must be disposed of in a refuse incineration facility. Burning old wooden railway sleepers or parts of sleepers in the open air or in private wood-fired facilities is prohibited as highly toxic gases are generated because the combustion temperature is too low.

You may also return used wooden railway sleepers to SBB, who will dispose of the sleepers for you in an environmentally acceptable manner. Please get in touch with the SBB Material Sales, verkauf.btc@sbb.ch. You will then receive a personal quotation for disposal according to the quantity, condition and origin/source of the wooden sleepers.

Further recycling points may be found in the local recycling directory or on the Internet at www.abfall.ch (go to Eisenbahnschwellen » Problematische Holzabfälle). Please find out about the acceptance conditions applying in your area.

4. How toxic are old wooden railway sleepers?

Some of the constituents of the creosote with which the railway sleepers have been impregnated are toxic. These are known as PAHs – polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons. There are various types of PAH, some of which are considered carcinogenic. However, the carcinogenic PAHs are of low volatility, and thus do not generally escape into the atmosphere. Consequently, there is only a risk to health after many years of contact with the skin. Wooden sleepers impregnated with creosote are not suitable for use in children's playgrounds, in the garden or in any indoor environment.

As it is not possible to prevent the absorption of PAH through the skin, contact with creosote visibly oozing from impregnated timbers should be avoided. It is therefore advisable to cover objects impregnated with creosote (for instance benches or tables, edges of sandpits, toys, etc.). Should you nevertheless come into contact with impregnated objects, you should wash the parts of the skin affected thoroughly.
It is currently uncertain whether plants can absorb PAH through the soil. As a precautionary measure, you should therefore observe a safety distance of half a metre from any old sleepers when planting fruit and vegetables. In addition, you should wash thoroughly any fruit and vegetables that have grown near the sleepers before eating them.

5. **Will SBB continue to use wooden sleepers in the future?**

Yes, SBB will continue to use wooden sleepers in the future, as they have properties and benefits that no other material has.

- Wood is an easily worked building material. This is particularly important in the case of points timbers, which have to be modified on site.
- As a material, wood has excellent elastic properties. It is therefore particularly good at damping vibrations.
- Wooden sleepers can also be used if the ground conditions are not favourable, and the ground can be cleared with less effort.
- Wooden sleepers are very resilient, which minimises the damage in the event of a derailment. For these reasons, they are often used in marshalling yards.
- As wooden sleepers suffer relatively little damage on impacts, they are often used in mountainous regions where there is an increased risk of rock falls.
- Wooden sleepers are insensitive to dynamic impact loads, such as those occurring in tight-radius curves.