

El Dorado Hills asbestos levels don't warrant full-scale study, U.S. report says

Cathy Locke, Sacramento Bee, 4-5-10

El Dorado Hills residents face increased risks of disease from exposure to naturally occurring asbestos, but asbestos levels don't appear to be high enough to warrant an extensive health study, according to federal health officials.

A "health consultation" report released last week by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, a branch of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, evaluated risks of asbestos exposure throughout the community.

It addressed questions raised by residents following a similar report in 2005 that focused on risks of asbestos exposure at El Dorado Hills' Oak Ridge High School campus.

During a community meeting on the 2005 report, residents asked officials to take a broader look at potential health effects and what could be done to minimize risks, said Jill Dyken, a federal environmental health scientist.

The most recent study focused on air sampling done by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in El Dorado Hills in 2004 but also looked at other studies done in the area. The EPA sampling showed that people engaged in outdoor recreational activities in El Dorado Hills could breathe in high levels of asbestos.

The latest report reinforces the importance of measures, such as the county's dust control regulations, to minimize exposure to asbestos, Dyken said.

But she said a more extensive health study probably would not be useful.

"We don't think the exposure is high enough that we would be able to measure elevated rates of diseases in the community," Dyken said.

That recommendation could be revised as research on the health effects of exposure to naturally occurring asbestos evolves, she said.

El Dorado Hills resident Nadine Lauren welcomed the finding that overall levels in the community are not that high, but she wants county officials and developers to err on the side of caution. Lauren is a leader of group opposed to development on El Dorado Hills' Oak Ridge, an area known to contain a particularly toxic form of asbestos.

"It's a curtain a lot of people are hiding behind," Lauren said of those who say not enough is known about the link between naturally occurring asbestos exposure and disease to warrant curtailing development.

The main health concern related to asbestos exposure is mesothelioma, an inoperable and almost always fatal cancer of the membranes lining the chest and other body cavities, asbestos health experts say.

The number of people in El Dorado Hills who would develop disease caused by naturally occurring asbestos probably would be very low, the health report says. It notes that exposures in the community are much lower

than those cited in historical studies of asbestos workers, as well as those suggested by limited exposure studies in other communities with naturally occurring asbestos where disease was found.

A health study would be further complicated because asbestos-related conditions typically take decades to develop, the report says, and large increases in development and population in El Dorado Hills have occurred in the past 15 years.

The registry's health consultation on Oak Ridge High School reported that the California Cancer Surveillance Program found no elevation in expected mesothelioma rates for western El Dorado County from 1999 to 2001.

Gerri Silva, county environmental management director, said the county will work with federal health officials to better educate the public on ways to minimize exposure to naturally occurring asbestos. Public meetings will be scheduled to discuss the latest report.

The county has established strict dust control regulations for construction and set up a hotline to receive reports of violations.

"We haven't had any heavy construction activity (due to the economic downturn)," she said, "but should that occur, we will go into force again."