

Asbestos abundant in Lode, study says

Walt Cook, Sonora Union Democrat, 3-31-10

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services released a report Monday on the dangers posed in the Mother Lode by asbestos, a naturally occurring mineral known to cause cancer and lung disease.

The bad news, according to the report, is that asbestos is prevalent in much of the Mother Lode. In fact, outcrops of serpentine — the official state rock, which can contain asbestos — are found on roughly 2,000 miles in 42 counties in the state.

The good news is, as per the report, if you happen to be among those rare individuals who actually encounter enough of the substance to die from exposure, it usually takes decades to develop.

Asbestos is only dangerous when it becomes airborne, making it a malady of the lungs.

When the mineral's tiny, needle-like fibers are inhaled, they pierce lung tissue. They can then scar the lungs, making it difficult to breathe — a condition called "asbestosis."

Asbestos fibers that slice through the lungs and into the chest cavity lining injure cells and cause cancerous tumors.

Mesothelioma is the resulting rare cancer. It can take 25 to 40 years to develop, yet it kills nearly all its victims within a year of diagnosis.

Sometimes, significant exposure to asbestos results in no health issues.

A number of former employees of the now-closed Asbestos Monofill off O'Byrnes Ferry Road in Copperopolis — at one time the nation's largest asbestos mine — can attest to that. Some of the former miners still live in Tuolumne and Calaveras counties.

For all its downsides, asbestos has proven to be a valuable tool over the years due to its fire-resistant properties. For much of the 20th century it was used in a wide array of building material until its dangers became apparent. Today, it still has some industrial uses. For instance, it's used in brake pads.

Tuolumne County Public Works Director Peter Rei noted that laws restrict the use of asbestos-containing construction materials. But, nonetheless, they can be used in certain conditions.

"Typically speaking, we just try to stay away from it, but if contractors want to use it, they're obligated to surface it on top with asphalt," Rei said.

The Health and Human Service's asbestos report focused on the El Dorado Hills area, a Mother Lode community east of Sacramento, though it mentioned the mineral's presence in this area.

Public comment is allowed on the report until June 30. The report was written by the department's Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, which can be reached at 1-800-232-4636.

In the end, the report may lead to new measures designed to reduce asbestos exposure in El Dorado Hills or

simply serve to educate the public.

The 140-page report was initiated following concerns in the late 1990s about asbestos exposure in El Dorado Hills.

The report reached the following conclusions:

- Background levels of asbestos in El Dorado Hills are higher than asbestos levels in most rural and urban communities; and “breathing in asbestos in the El Dorado Hills area, over a lifetime, has the potential to harm health.”
- Educating the public about how to avoid asbestos exposure and enforcing state and local regulations designed to curb exposure can preserve human health.
- Because asbestos-caused diseases take decades to develop, subsequent health studies on the El Dorado Hills area will likely prove fruitless. But monitoring should continue in the area.

The report’s findings have frustrated Terry Trent, the man who, in 1998, raised awareness about asbestos in El Dorado Hills. He called the report a “minimal response to invoke further or clumsy inadequate action.”

Trent abandoned his home near there in 1998, leaving behind possessions tainted with asbestos in the process — bedding, furniture, curtains and clothing.

A retired construction-cost engineer, Trent said he discovered asbestos in his yard — after cutting into a vein of the mineral with a backhoe — in 1989, when he was putting in the water lines for his home in Latrobe, just south of El Dorado Hills.

Nearby development kicked more of the mineral into the air, and he said he developed breathing problems as a result. So he moved.

Though frustrated with the report, Trent, now living in Auburn, noted he is “not completely dissatisfied.”

“For the first time they have admitted future deaths, even though they attempt to minimize that impact,” he said. “That is more than enough for attorneys to act on.”

Numerous lawsuits have been filed over the years due to deaths and disease linked to asbestos exposure in mines and other industrial sites