



Feb. 26, 2003 - Mineral mayhem - The story of asbestos in El Dorado County

By COLLEEN FLANNERY, Staff writer

EL DORADO HILLS - For many, naturally occurring asbestos has become a sort of serpentine soap opera, full of heroes and villains, victims and antagonists.

Tune in for the latest development. The Environmental Protection Agency recently ordered testing at Silva Valley Elementary and Rolling Hills Middle schools, as well as at the El Dorado Hills Community Services District building. Silva Valley previously tested negative for airborne asbestos, earlier reports show.

"Now, we have one agency telling us what to do (about Oak Ridge High School) instead of a variety of agencies telling us what to do," said Bob Ferguson, superintendent of the El Dorado Union High School District.

Not everyone views EPA involvement in that light. County Environmental Management Department head Jon Morgan aired grievances in an e-mail addressed to EPA officials.

"Our experience with Fed EPA Region IX over the past year has been extraordinarily shocking and disappointing," Morgan wrote.

Although El Dorado County's naturally occurring asbestos issues have garnered comparisons with asbestos in Libby, Mont., it's like "comparing grapes with watermelons," according to federal EPA spokesman Mark Merchant. A similar type of asbestos - actinolite, not the commercially used chrysotile asbestos - was found in Libby's soil.

The county told Ferguson to clean classrooms over spring break, hoping to rid the school of asbestos, he said. That angered representatives of the Environmental Protection Agency and the state Air Resources Board, both of which wanted to test classrooms to see if kids had been exposed. At \$1,000 per classroom, Ferguson ordered the rooms cleaned, to protect kids, he said.

In Libby, Mont., asbestos naturally occurring in mined vermiculite has stricken generations of residents, according to a recently released book, "An Air That Kills," by Andrew Schneider of the Seattle Post Intelligencer. Some mined it in the early days, and recalled diving without respirators into a vein of the stuff - just for the fun of emerging with "angel wings" of the fibers. Their wives scrubbed asbestos dust off their homes' walls, and their children played on baseball fields sprayed with the stuff or swung rope swings into piles of soft asbestos dust. In Libby, people carry their personal oxygen tanks as talisman against the mesothelioma and asbestosis that slowly chokes them to death.

But lessons from Libby apply to El Dorado County. From Libby, agencies have learned how to control the asbestos that fills the soil - good landscaping or paving keeps the dust from becoming airborne. Scientists who applied themselves to solving asbestos issues in Libby have helped El Dorado Hills' mitigation and investigation process, which remains far from an exact science, Merchant said. Not only has government regulation failed to keep pace with the developments in science, the science itself has yet to make a connection between asbestos in the ground and airborne fibers, Merchant said.

For instance, there is "no way to tell" if asbestos in the ground poses the risk of becoming airborne, Merchant said. The EPA uses a standard set in Libby - 1 percent asbestos in the soil. Preliminary test results from Oak Ridge High School have given results that soar to nearly 8 percent, although those test results have yet to receive the independent verification the agency requires. Still, the levels seemed high enough for immediate action, EPA officials have said.

"I can assure you that the analytical results from other... EPA approved laboratories will be dramatically different," Morgan writes in his critical e-mail.

County officials have begun quietly asking whether El Dorado County has become some sort of target for a naturally occurring asbestos debate that may rage statewide for years. Call it the "squeaking wheel" effect - an EPA mandate requires it to respond to every such petition it gets, and only El Dorado County has received such petitionary attention.

Although asbestos lies beneath 44 of California's 58 counties, only El Dorado County has residents and concerned parties asking the EPA and the state Air Resources Board to evaluate, Merchant said, nor have they asked for federal health officials with the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) to monitor sites. A Santa Rosa woman filed such a petition with ATSDR. Petitions have been filed by local and out-of-county residents seeking further testing at Silva Valley Elementary School, Rolling Hills Middle School and El Dorado Hills' Community Services District building, all located near Oak Ridge High School.

There are no plans at this time to extend the monitoring into neighboring developments, Merchant confirmed. As far as the high school district paying for an additional million-dollar expected mitigation, the EPA plans to talk that over at a later date, Merchant said. The high school district has added an additional \$100,000 to the \$1.5 million it has spent on mitigation efforts already. Consultants alone cost the school nearly \$1,000 a day, Ferguson confirmed.

Much of the mitigation money has been spent on construction efforts and further testing, Ferguson said. The school district has replaced all of the soil in Oak Ridge High's soccer and softball fields, lining the fields with cloth to keep soil in place. It has paved the school track and paid for hundreds of air and soil samples collected by a company that sampled Libby's soil and air.

The money spent on Oak Ridge was slated for construction of a brand-new high school off Green Valley Road, near the new Pleasant Grove Middle School. Construction on that school will wait another year, Ferguson said.

Getting Oak Ridge its money back has become a "high priority" for Congressman John Doolittle, according to his press secretary, Laura Blachan. He hopes to add cost recovery to an appropriations bill before Congress, she said.

"Even though the district is the first in the nation to be regulated by the EPA for naturally-occurring asbestos, school officials have moved quickly to comply with all testing and mitigation requirements," the congressman states. "By federally funding the costs of meeting these standards, I hope to ensure that the school district can invest education dollars into classroom instruction, where it belongs."

The Oak Ridge conflict - which began in 1998 with the discovery of asbestos on one of the school's athletic fields - is just a part of the county's struggle with asbestos issues. In 1999, a local cancer center released figures that apparently showed 23 people - all men - had died from mesothelioma over 10 years in El Dorado County. Half of them were from medium to high risk occupations, with three of them being pipefitters, one a miner and one a career navy man. Their length of residence in El Dorado County was not known.

This prompted discussion of a Naturally Occurring Asbestos ordinance, which sought to require air monitoring during long-term grading projects. It's now known as a "fugitive dust" regulation, Morgan wrote, and he states it stipulates "prudent avoidance" of known asbestos.

When a stronger measure failed to pass, the state Air Resources Board wrote a letter to the county.

"The county is not moving to implement needed health protections," the letter stated in part.

That same year, the state Department of Conservation sued the county over its oversight of the Weber Creek Quarry. The suit alleged the county knew quarry had apparently released asbestos into the air, asbestos potentially able to cause between 22 and 290 cancer cases per million, according to the ARB. In a separate lawsuit, it challenged local mine owner Loring Brunius, alleging "exposed asbestos" meant Brunius' mine must be covered.

Neither lawsuit has been completely concluded at press time.

Contact Colleen Flannery at cflannery@mtdemocrat.net or call her at 344-5062.