Former Vermiculite Northwest Processing Facility

Neighborhood Sampling *Spokane, Washington*

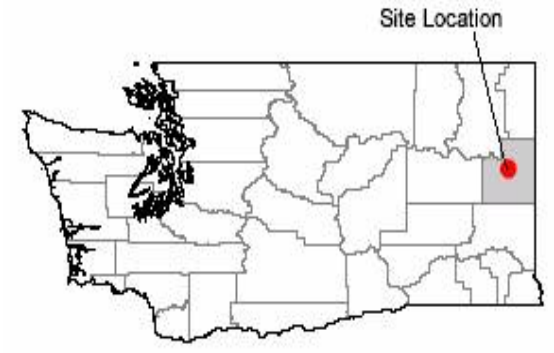
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 10 May 2009

EPA to collect soil samples in late June

In 2001, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency tested soil samples collected from some residential yards surrounding the former Vermiculite Northwest processing facility. Some of the samples contained very low, but detectable levels of asbestos fibers (less than one percent). Since that time, scientists working on asbestos sites around the country have found that even with a concentration as low as one percent of asbestos in soil, and sometimes lower, there is still a potential for asbestos fibers to become airborne and present an inhalation hazard. For this reason, the EPA is planning on returning in late June to collect additional soil samples from some properties near the former vermiculite processing facility.

What will be done with the samples?

The samples will be taken to a laboratory, dried, and placed in a device that separates out fine particles (including asbestos fibers) from the bulk soil and deposits these on a filter. The filter will be viewed with a microscope to see whether asbestos is present. Results from this testing will help determine the need for a possible second round of sampling called "activity-based sampling." This second round of testing would involve sampling the air during dust-generating activities, such as digging and raking soils, to see if the asbestos fibers are released into the air.



What We Know

- Asbestos was detected at very low levels at some residential properties during soil sampling in 2001. Improved methods for testing asbestos in soils exist today, which will help us better understand if asbestos fibers might be present and getting into the air.
- Asbestos fibers are generally not a health risk unless they can get into the air where people can breathe them into their lungs.

Next Steps

- During the week of June 29th, EPA plans to collect soil samples from some yards and properties near the former Vermiculite Northwest processing plant.
- EPA will be testing the soil samples to see if they contain asbestos fibers that could get into the air.
- Once we have the results, we will notify the property owner and/or residents about what we found.
- These results will be used to determine the potential need for and focus of a second round of sampling. This will involve "activity-based sampling," as described above.

Background

The Vermiculite Northwest property, located at 1318 N. Maple Street in Spokane, was home to a vermiculite exfoliation facility from 1951 to 1973. The facility was operated by Vermiculite Northwest, Inc. and later by W.R. Grace and Company. Vermiculite ore from Libby, Montana, was received at the property. The ore contained asbestos. Records show that up to 10,317 tons of vermiculite ore was processed at the facility from January 1967 to October 1970.

After 1973, the property was occupied by the Wilbert Vault Company, which manufactured concrete products, such as septic tanks and burial vaults. Spokane County acquired the property in January 2000 and has since used it as an equipment storage and maintenance yard.

What is asbestos and how can it affect my health?

Asbestos is the name of a group of minerals that can separate into long, thin fibers. Asbestos fibers are strong and flexible enough to be spun and woven, and are resistant to heat, fire, and chemical and biological breakdown. Breathing asbestos fibers can cause asbestosis — a disease that scars and stiffens the lungs and two types of cancer: lung cancer, and mesothelioma, a rare cancer of the thin lining surrounding the lung or abdominal cavity. These diseases do not develop immediately, but can show up 15 to 40 years after asbestos exposure.

Being exposed to asbestos, however, does not mean you will develop health problems. There are many factors that contribute to the risk of developing disease. The most important of these are:

- How long and how frequently a person was exposed to asbestos
- How long it has been since the exposure to asbestos
- The amount of asbestos a person was exposed to
- The size and type of asbestos fibers a person was exposed to
- Whether or not a person smokes cigarettes, since asbestos exposure increases the chances of a smoker get ting lung cancer
- Whether or not other pre-existing lung conditions are present

A doctor can help you find out if you have health problems from asbestos exposure.

More Information

You may contact us any time if you have questions about the sampling:

- Greg Weigel: 208-378-5773 or *weigel.greg@epa.gov*
- Caryn Klaff: 206-553-1275 or *klaff.caryn@epa.gov*

Alternative formats are available. For reasonable accommodation, please call Caryn Klaff at 206-553-1275. TTY users, please call the Federal Relay Service at 800-877-8339.

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