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W.R. Grace Asbestos Hotspots in North Dakota

As the Senate begins consideration of a controversial plan to establish a national asbestos trust fund, many problems with the proposed plan have come to light.

One of the most notable is a provision in the bill that allows residents of Libby, Montana, home of the notorious W.R. Grace vermiculite mine and hundreds of people injured by asbestos, to sidestep the Byzantine criteria for assistance in the bill, and receive a guaranteed award of $400,000. The provision is notable, not so much for its special attention to the people of Libby, who by all accounts deserve the assistance, but in the absence of such care for any of the hundreds of communities around the country that received and processed thousands of tons of asbestos contaminated Libby vermiculite for decades.

In North Dakota, more than 13,272 tons of the Libby ore were sent to a location in Stanton between 1948 and 1993. These plants typically "popped" or exfoliated the ore to produce vermiculite attic insulation and other products. This process produced a massive amount of asbestos-contaminated dust, very high workplace exposures, and significant airborne asbestos in the surrounding neighborhoods.

Asbestos Shipments Received in North Dakota

At least 317 shipments of vermiculite went from Libby, MT to 3 locations in North Dakota

City	Number of Shipments	Number of Locations	Tons Shipped*
Stanton, ND	150	1	13,272
Minot, ND	137	1	12,053
Center, ND • Milton Young Station	29	1	667
Bismarck, ND	1	1	n/a *
North Dakota total	317	3	25,993

Source: EWG Action Fund analysis of shipment invoices from Libby, MT.

*Numerous shipment invoices from Libby that were tallied by U.S. EPA did not include a specific street address for the destination, the tons shipped, or dates of shipment; some invoices lacked all this information, based on the EPA database in which the tabulations are recorded. As a result, the 'tons shipped' data presented here likely underestimate the actual amount of asbestos shipped to specific destinations, states, or for the United States as a whole.

The federal government (ATSDR and EPA) is currently conducting contamination assessments at the 28 largest factories that processed Libby vermiculite. This review, however, leaves out many sites, such as those in Stanton, that were slightly smaller, but that still process tens of

thousands of tons of asbestos-contaminated ore, and exposed hundreds of workers and neighbors to the deadly dust. This marks the only time ever that the government has conducted health and safety assessments for an entire industry, particularly one that is shut down. The reason, of course, is that asbestos is incredibly hazardous.

Health officials have expressed serious concern about the risks for community residents living near these facilities. An EPA toxicologist describing medical screening results on 1,078 people who lived near a W.R. Grace asbestos processing plant in Minneapolis, MN put it this way: “The clear indication is that if you lived near one of these processing plants, your risk of debilitating and possible lung disease is extremely high” (Minneapolis Star Tribune 2/24/01).

"It's like a ticking time bomb inside your chest," said an expert with the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) describing a priority vermiculite processing site in Beltsville, Maryland (Washington Post 10/3/03). Madelene Audia, who lives about 150 yards from a former vermiculite plant in Dearborn, Michigan, recalled dust wafting through the neighborhood in the 1960s and 1970s. It settled in homes and on the local ball field where her two children played almost every day. "It would get so bad you couldn't go outdoors," she said (Detroit Free Press 1/22/04).

At least 94 people in North Dakota have died from mesothelioma or asbestosis as reported to the federal government via death certificate records from 1979 through 2001. This figure likely represents less than 20 percent of total asbestos mortality during that time. It does not include a single lung cancer death caused by asbestos, although national estimates of lung cancer mortality from asbestos range from 5,000 to 10,000 per year during that period. Government data also grossly underestimate mesothelioma mortality, the signature asbestos-caused cancer. This is in part due to under-diagnosis of the disease, but in greater measure because mesothelioma was not tracked by the federal government as a cause of death until 1999.

As the Senate considers legislation to eliminate all liability for asbestos companies, prosecutors have taken an entirely different approach. The U.S. Department of Justice brought criminal charges against W.R. Grace executives this spring, charging that company officials lied to the EPA about the risks that asbestos presented to the town. If these executives lied about the risks of asbestos to the residents of Libby, which has been under the klieg lights for the past 5 years, it would be foolhardy to assume that the full truth has been told about the risks of Libby asbestos to the communities where it was shipped.

Without question, some of the workers, their families, and the people who lived near these facilities will contract some forms of asbestos disease, either asbestosis, lung cancer, or mesothelioma. A 1967 summary of 42 mesothelioma cases in southeastern Pennsylvania showed that 21 percent of cases occurred in people who either lived or worked near a plant that used asbestos, and 26 percent occurred where family members were asbestos workers (Lieben, 1967). An estimated 6.7% of mesothelioma cases reviewed in a 1966 survey in the United Kingdom (London, Belfast and Liverpool) were linked to take home and neighborhood exposures.

In Libby, Montana, the site of the notorious W.R. Grace vermiculite mine, entire families have been diagnosed with asbestos-related diseases, when just one family member, usually the father, worked at the mine and brought home asbestos dust on his clothes. Children in Libby have developed mesothelioma and asbestosis as adults from playing in vermiculite slag heaps scattered through the town.

In 1997, Dr. Michael Berry, a scientist at the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services, published a study that investigated mesothelioma incidence in people who lived in the same town (Manville, NJ) or county (Somerset) as the largest asbestos manufacturing plant in North America (Berry, 1997). When plant employees were removed from the analysis, male and female residents of Manville were 10.1 and 22.4 times more likely to develop mesothelioma than residents of New Jersey not living in Somerset county. In all, 24 cases of mesothelioma occurred between 1979-1990 when only 2 would have been expected. Men and women living in Somerset county as a whole were 1.9 and 2 times as likely to develop the disease, a statistically significant increase (58 cases were observed and approximately 30 were expected).

References for above are available at:
http://www.ewg.org/reports/asbestos/maps/shipment_data.php

W.R. Grace Indicted on Federal Criminal Charges
http://www.ewg.org/reports/lungcancer/wrgrace.php