

# Rachel's Environment & Health News

## #68 - Asbestos Hazard More Widespread Than Formerly Thought: 733,000 Commercial Buildings Affected

March 13, 1988

One out of every five commercial buildings in the U.S. contains friable (easily broken) asbestos fibers, the type that poses the greatest cancer risk to humans, says an EPA (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency) report released two weeks ago.

The study said that of 3.6 million commercial buildings in the U.S., 733,000 contain asbestos that could break up into inhalable fibers; of these 733,000 buildings, 500,000 or 68% contain asbestos that is already damaged, most of it "significantly damaged," and are therefore likely to contain airborne asbestos.

The study looked at a statistical sample of 231 buildings and found asbestos most common in large residential apartment buildings; 60% of the apartment buildings tested contain asbestos.

Asbestos is a grey, powdery-fibrous material used for fire-proofing. The fibers are so tiny they can float in the air indefinitely, once they become airborne. Breathing asbestos fibers into the lung causes an increased risk of lung cancer. Smokers have a greatly increased risk from asbestos fibers.

The EPA study said the people at greatest risk in commercial buildings are service personnel and maintenance workers, especially those in boiler rooms (janitors, plumbers, heating technicians, etc.).

EPA plans to take no action on the study and will not recommend any new regulations or programs in the next three years, except to beef up a training program to increase the supply of asbestos control professionals. EPA argues that current resources (money, staff) are barely adequate to deal with asbestos in schools. (EPA estimates that 35,000 U.S. schools contain potentially-hazardous asbestos.) EPA argues further that starting a program now to deal with asbestos in commercial buildings, when professional staff are not available to do the job right, would increase the hazard beyond its present level, making the problem worse instead of better.

The Service Employees International Union, representing 150,000 workers, calls EPA's response "unacceptable" and will initiate a lawsuit to require EPA to survey all commercial buildings. The union wants the agency to help maintenance workers identify hazardous work sites.

For further information, contact the EPA person in charge of the asbestos control program for schools in your EPA region: Region 1: Alison Roberts in Boston: (617) 565-3275; Region 2: Arnold Freiberger, in Edison, NJ: (201) 321-6671; Region 3: Pauline Levin in Philadelphia: (215) 5979859; Region 4: Jim Littell in Atlanta: (404) 347-3222; Region 5: Tony Restaino in Chicago: (312) 886-6003; Region 6: John West in Dallas: (214) 655-7244; Region 7: Wolfgang Brandner in Kansas City, KS: (913) 236-2838; Region 8: Dave Combs in Denver: (303) 293-1744; Region 9: JoAnn Semones in San Francisco: (415) 974-7290; Region 10: Walt Jasper in Seattle: (206) 442-2870. For a copy of the latest report contact the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA) Assistance Office (TAO), TS-799, EPA, Washington, DC 20460; phone: (202) 554-1404.

--Peter Montague

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CALIFORNIA'S TOXICS WATCHDOG; USEFUL INFORMATION EVERY MONTH

Ten times a year the mail brings us the TOXICS WATCHDOG from editor Sam Bulova of the Toxics Coordinating Project (TCP) in Sacramento, California and we love it. Every issue brings useful news for toxics fighters everywhere. The Watchdog has two sections of general interest: News Notes and Publications. Here are a few examples from the latest issue, showing why we value the Watchdog so highly:

The EPA (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency) annual budget decreased between 1981 and 1986, from 5.1 billion to 4.9 billion, and these figures are not adjusted for inflation. During the same period, the annual military budget increased from \$175 billion to \$260 billion and annual payments on the national debt increased from \$100 billion to \$180 billion. [NY TIMES Feb. 16, 1988.]

Mushrooms that have been treated with radioactivity are reportedly being used in Rice-A-Roni and Mushroom Noodle Roni. The National Coalition to Stop Food Irradiation (NCSFI) says the irradiated mushrooms are being used under conditions that may be illegal and they recommend phoning your protest to Quaker Oats, toll free, at (800) 621- 9525. Dennis Mosgofian, the director of NCSFI, can be reached in San Francisco, CA, at (415) 566-2734.

A California state Public Utilities Commission Report accuses Southern California Gas Company of ignoring health risks by buying and distributing gas drawn from a landfill and contaminated with vinyl chloride and other gases known to cause cancer. The utility defends itself saying the landfill gas was diluted with natural gas before it was piped into peoples' homes, thus diluting the hazard. [California Public Utilities Commission's phone, in Sacramento: (916) 445-5231.]

A Citizen's Guide for Community Health Studies is available free from the Michigan State Toxic Substance Control Commission. "So clearly written and evenly stated that it's hard to believe that a government agency could produce it," says the Watchdog. Outlines the pluses and minuses of conducting a community health study, and offers a process that provides a clear role for, and a degree of control by, the affected community. Free from the Commission in Lansing at: (517) 373- 1031.

ASBESTOS ABATEMENT: A GUIDE TO ABATEMENT from: Asbestos Victims of America, P.O. Box 559, Capitola, CA 95010. \$10.00. [Phone: (408) 476- 3646.]

THE NEW SUPERFUND: WHAT IT IS AND HOW IT WORKS "a small, handy brochure" from EPA, dated August, 1987, describes the new parts of Superfund. Free from the Superfund hotline: (800) 424-9346.

The TOXICS WATCHDOG is a publication of the Toxics Coordinating Project, one of the toughest toxics coalitions in the country. Incidentally, the Project is looking for an executive director to replace Mike Picker, who is retiring from that position though remaining active with the Project. Mike's shoes will be difficult (impossible) to fill, but the Project is solid and offers an excellent opportunity for a toxics activist to lead the way on toxics use reduction, which is a TCP priority the next few years. Contact the Project c/o the Coalition on Environmental and Occupational Health Hazards, 2609 Capitol Ave., Sacramento, CA 95816; phone (916) 441-4077. The Watchdog is \$25/yr and worth it.

--Peter Montague

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Descriptor terms: ca; toxics coordinating project; epa; food irradiation; national coalition to stop food irradiation; quaker oats; consumer protection; landfilling; cancer; carcinogens; health; occupational safety and health; asbestos; cancer; epa; studies; findings; particulates; lung cancer; occupational safety and health; labor unions;