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EPA clears air on asbestos in soil

Officials reassures local audience of over 300

By Ryan Rose

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Ryan Rose/THE Telegraph
Hundreds gathered to hear the EPA's presentation on naturally occurring asbestos in El Dorado Hills.

"We do not have Oak Ridge High School or El Dorado Hills in our gun sights in any way," said Dan Meer, branch chief with the Environmental Protection Agency's regional office in San Francisco. "It's not our intention to list a bunch of Superfund sites in the county."

If there was a thesis to EPA's presentation last Wednesday, that was surely it.

Appearing more the neighbor than the nemesis, the EPA dispelled rumors and instructed the public on the dangers of naturally occurring asbestos.

Meer and other EPA officials encouraged questions and sought to resolve concerns.

"With an attendance of more than 300 community members, I believe the EPA under Dan Meer's leadership, provided a unique communication vehicle that allowed everyone to be heard regarding Natural Occurring Asbestos in our county," said Oak Ridge Principal Tom Gemma.

The main purpose of the meeting was to update the public on the EPA's plans for El Dorado Hills.

Since the discovery of dangerous levels of naturally occurring asbestos at Oak Ridge High School last November, federal officials have been on campus cleaning up and removing contaminated soil.

EPA officials have no plans to designate Oak Ridge High School or other possibly hazardous sites as "Superfund" sites. They only use that title on the most polluted areas in the nation, Meer said.

Last week EPA officials began testing parks and schools near the high school in an effort to determine if additional clean-up work is needed.

Dan Sutor, an EPA on-scene coordinator, said El Dorado Hills could remedy the situation if the hazardous soil is covered. By preventing contaminated soil from reaching the air, the danger is eliminated, he explained.

That is the plan of action at Oak Ridge High School. Crews recently finished removing contaminated soil from the school's baseball and softball diamonds, then covered the fields with an Eco-tarp and placed a new layer of soil on top.

Sutor said federal officials and national contractors will likely return in the spring and summer to check on the work.

The audience did criticize the EPA for not being more involved.

"It was evident to me as principal, that parents were generally concerned about the safety of their children, property values, and a long term solution to the problem," said Gemma. "It was also evident to me that self-proclaimed experts in the audience were there to further their own agenda."

According to Sutor, the EPA will finish its work at Oak Ridge High School by the end of summer vacation.

