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Print Date: Thursday, December 28, 2006

Last modified: Tuesday, December 26, 2006 4:08 PM PST

New asbestos report refutes industry study

By: Cheri March

In a report released by U.S. Geologic Survey last week, scientists refuted previous criticisms of a 2004 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency asbestos study.

USGS conducted the independent study of amphiboles and soils in El Dorado Hills at the request of the EPA.

The agency looked to investigate specific issues addressed by a November 2005 National Stone, Sand, & Gravel Association report prepared by RJ Lee Group.

"They critiqued our report and raised some pretty technical issues," said Daniel Meer, branch chief of EPA's Region 9.

In response to a request for a second opinion, RJLG released a report in late 2005 rebuking the EPA's methods. The report suggested that materials identified by the EPA and its contract laboratories did not fit the definition of naturally occurring asbestos for the purpose of regulation and should therefore not be considered a public health threat.

RJLG argued that methods used by the EPA could not differentiate between asbestos and non-asbestos amphiboles.

"We think this survey pretty much refutes most of the Lee Report," Meer said.

The RJLG report, for example, had claimed that amphibole asbestos was not present in the EPA study because particles were too aluminum-rich to form amphiboles.

According to Meer, the USGS report did not find aluminum content to correlate with that suggested by the Lee Group review.

The veracity of the Lee Group results has at times been questioned due to the group's ties to the building industry.

The Lee Group reacted to the study by drafting a detailed response letter to the EPA and USGS.

Drew Van Orden, the group's chief analyst, said that while reports compiled by his company and USGS both found the asbestiform mineral tremolite, EPA identified most particles in their study as non-asbestos actinolite.

He again emphasized that EPA's analytical methods were inadequate to begin with.

"In the end, USGS went out and re-established what was known for 10 years or more, that there are all kinds of amphibole minerals in El Dorado and some of it is asbestos," he said.

Van Orden went on to explain that the amphibole particles studied did not meet the dimensional requirements of asbestos fibers related to health effects.

Meer said he had not directly heard anything from the group and remained positive that, overall, the USGS report confirms most previous scientific research.

When asked about health risks, he said the study was not meant to assess potential dangers of asbestos, only its presence. The study itself states that its purpose was not to determine whether commercial-asbestos properties, or the lack thereof, are equated with toxicity.

"USGS never intended to speak about health risk," Meer said. "The suggestion is for local and state public officials to take a look at the other information out there and try to make some determinations about the next steps for the

community."

He added, "It's time to say 'Okay, it's here, we're living with it, now what can we do to manage the risk.'"

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