

June 23, 2004 - Asbestos work close to done at Oak Ridge

By COLLEEN FLANNERY Staff writer

EL DORADO HILLS - This August, Oak Ridge High School students will return to a campus free of naturally occurring asbestos danger.

Federal Environmental Protection Agency site coordinator Dan Suter said work at the school should be done by the Fourth of July weekend. Students will return to find a campus with paved pathways, gravel and landscaping where bare dirt was before.

Suter, who acts as a combination construction supervisor and scientist for EPA, has said that removing the top layers of soil, covering it with filter fabric and then landscaping the ground above mitigates the presence of the potentially harmful mineral. So far, the work on tracks, trails and throughways at Oak Ridge has cost the federal agency about \$600,000, Suter said.

"I treat it like it's my own money," he joked, noting he's saved money on a \$1 million budget. The project will likely take some \$750,000 to \$800,000 to complete, he said, on top of the millions already spent by El Dorado Union High School District in an effort to solve the problem.

One incident of vandalism perturbed the EPA, Suter said. A group of young people apparently tried, unsuccessfully, to take a joyride on some construction equipment. They were caught by local sheriff's deputies when they "borrowed" some of the school's electric carts and apparently threw paint around. In response, the federal agency had to hire security and fence off the work, Suter said.

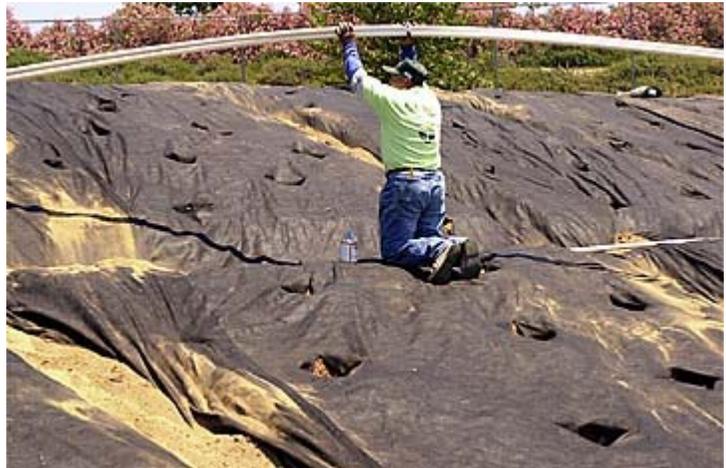
School district officials won't be sorry to see the end of the asbestos problem at Oak Ridge, Superintendent Bob Ferguson has said. Ferguson, who has put notice of his retirement in, has cited past frustrations with the EPA. So has El Dorado County, prompting the EPA to give officials "a bigger role" in asbestos mitigation work.

This summer, so-called "integrated assessment," a planned document, will describe the work at Oak Ridge and detail further needed work at Silva Valley Elementary School and the El Dorado Hills Community Center.

Tremolite asbestos, found throughout El Dorado County in the serpentine rocks lining the Bear Creek Fault, is apparently more harmful than the chrysotile asbestos once used in bulletproof vests, color crayons and insulation. Scientists have linked long-term asbestos exposure to lung cancer, mesothelioma cancer and asbestosis, a non-cancerous lung disease.

Suter said the EPA has shown El Dorado County how to deal with the asbestos issue, through the experience the agency has gained in clean-ups of lead and asbestos statewide and across the nation.

"EPA's presence has increased El Dorado County's awareness of asbestos," said Suter.



EPPIE SANCHEZ, a landscaper, lays irrigation line at Oak Ridge High School on Monday. The black filter fabric he walks on, and later landscaping, will keep asbestos-contaminated soil from reaching the surface, according to scientists. Plans for the school include a brand-new ticket booth selling admissions to games and a large screen of redwood trees around the auditorium, preventing free views of Trojan triumphs. See story, "Asbestos work close to done at Oak Ridge." *Democrat photo by Joanne McCubrey*

Indeed, the apparently increased awareness has led to the spark of an idea - a countywide asbestos regulation that very much mirrors the state's Airborne Toxics Control Measure, according to county pollution control officer Marcella McTaggart.

A map would identify areas in the county likely to contain naturally occurring asbestos in the soil. Along the Bear Creek Fault, an inactive local fault winding through El Dorado Hills and bisecting Latrobe and Bass Lake, the presence of tremolite asbestos was documented. In these asbestos-prone areas, contractors would have to use "more restrictive" practices, including landscaping and dust control.

"It would be tied to the construction permit," said McTaggart of the proposed rule. She compared the presence of asbestos along the dormant fault to a court proceeding where the mineral was "guilty until proven innocent." That is, the presence of asbestos in a fault area would be assumed true unless proven false by geologic evidence.

The would-be regulation would take asbestos control a step further, even requiring asbestos-area residents to track the dirt they excavate from swimming pools, McTaggart said.

Both McTaggart and Suter agreed mainstream science still isn't aware of the exact risk, if any, students were placed in at Oak Ridge. Some scientists say tremolite asbestos may affect lungs up to 100 times as much as the common chrysotile asbestos, while others say no official study proves that true. The exposure threshold of asbestos tolerance created by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration was set for workers exposed eight hours a day, five hours a week to the commercial chrysotile asbestos. Additionally, better microscopes mean labs can spot more fibers per sample.

Different labs also can get different results, said McTaggart. She cited one lab, which would grind and pulverize a sample for two hours, then bake it and break it down with hydrochloric acid. Needless to say, that lab would get different results than one looking at straight soil samples.

The regulation may face approval by the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors, McTaggart said. Additionally, county input will appear in the EPA's Integrated Assessment this summer.

"We are at the doorway of solving the naturally occurring asbestos problem in El Dorado County," McTaggart said.

For information on asbestos mitigation work at Oak Ridge, click on <http://www.epa.gov/region09/toxic/noa>; or contact EPA's Don Hodge, Community Involvement Coordinator, at (415) 972-3240, or hodge.don@epa.gov.

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