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Bill spotlights natural asbestos

A state task force would examine health risks in the Sierra foothills.

By Chris Bowman -- Bee Staff Writer

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The state Legislature has taken its first step toward regulating construction in areas with naturally occurring asbestos, a toxic air contaminant of growing concern in developing Sierra foothill communities.

The Senate Committee on Environmental Quality on Monday approved a bill that would have a team of state health and environmental specialists develop ways to assess and minimize residents' risks of asbestos-related disease.

The proposed state asbestos task force would not have regulatory power. But the results of its work likely would lead to tighter restrictions on grading, bulldozing, blasting and other earthwork in soil and rock known or likely to contain the fibrous minerals, the bill's author said.

"It will likely require state laws to further protect residents from exposure," said Sen. Deborah Ortiz, D-Sacramento.

The environmental committee passed the measure, Senate Bill 655, on a 5-1 bipartisan vote that included Dave Cox, R-Roseville, among its supporters.

Cox's vast 1st Senate District takes in many Sierra communities considered at greatest risk because they are undergoing development in geologic belts where a particularly hazardous form of asbestos known as amphibole occurs. Those areas include Amador and Calaveras counties, the foothills of El Dorado and Placer counties and the city of Folsom in Sacramento County.

Most experts consider the spearlike amphibole fibers hundreds of times more potent in the development of mesothelioma than the better known chrysotile form used in insulation, auto-brake lining and other commercial products.

Mesothelioma is a cancer of the lining of the chest and other body cavities that generally claims its victims within 18 months of diagnosis. As with other asbestos-related disease, mesothelioma develops 20 or more years after the initial exposure to asbestos fibers. Children are especially at risk because of their potentially long life spans.

Ortiz said the asbestos bill aims initially to coordinate what she sees as a hodgepodge of state, local and federal agencies that have been addressing the geologic hazard from different and possibly conflicting angles.

For example, the state Department of Toxic Substances Control addresses naturally occurring asbestos on unpaved roads and at proposed school sites. The state Department of Real Estate has rules for disclosure of the minerals occurrence in property transactions. The California Geologic Survey has guidelines for geologists investigating the hazard on behalf of developers.

Meanwhile, the state Air Resources Board requires special dust controls of builders in the asbestos zones.

And the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has stepped in to test for asbestos in the soil and air at schools and parks in El Dorado Hills. Later this month, the EPA and other agencies are expected

to release studies of asbestos exposure from everyday activities in western El Dorado County.

The assorted regulatory activities have developed all within the past eight years, spurred by a series of Bee stories that included asbestos tests commissioned by the newspaper. The Ortiz measure cites The Bee investigation in outlining the need for the bill.

Despite all the regulatory attention, Ortiz told the Senate committee, "Greater consideration needs to be given to the broader health risks associated with naturally occurring asbestos in the Sierra foothills. If there was an issue on school property, doesn't it stand to reason that development of surrounding properties may also present health risks to the residents?"

Ortiz recalled the recent EPA investigation of Libby, Mont., where a high percentage of the population has fallen ill or died from asbestos-related diseases. The catastrophe stems from the nearby historic strip-mining of vermiculite that is contaminated with highly toxic fibers closely related to amphibole or tremolite asbestos fibers that builders of homes, roads and schools have been churning up in parts of the Sierra foothills.

"For the people who were exposed to this harmful toxin for many years in Libby, Montana, it is too late to prevent illness," Ortiz said.

"It is imperative for the state of California to take appropriate steps to prevent this kind of senseless harm from coming to our citizens."

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