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## El Dorado seeks own answers on asbestos

**By Cathy Locke -- Bee Staff Writer**

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Citing significant discrepancies between federal government studies and mining industry studies of naturally occurring asbestos in El Dorado Hills, the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors will seek its own experts.

"There is a public health and safety issue, and a fiduciary responsibility on the county's part to get an independent analysis of the data," Supervisor Helen Baumann said Tuesday.

The board authorized Baumann to send a letter to Wayne Nastri, Environmental Protection Agency regional administrator in San Francisco, requesting postponement of a risk assessment based on agency data, pending review of a report commissioned by the National Stone, Sand & Gravel Association.

The board also directed Baumann and Supervisor Rusty Dupray to work with Chief Administrative Officer Laura Gill to arrange for an independent analysis of the data.

Jere Johnson, site assessment manager for the EPA, said Wednesday that she had not seen the letter. She said the risk assessment is under way, but the agency welcomes additional analyses.

"The more we can learn about asbestos and the science around it is a good thing. ... The important thing to remember is that we're looking at evaluating good science," she said.

The industry-funded analysis was conducted by the RJ Lee Group using soil samples the EPA collected from school and park sites in El Dorado Hills.

The EPA reported that tests done in October 2004 by agency technicians wearing personal air monitors showed that children's activities such as baseball, basketball and hopscotch significantly elevated an individual's exposure to tremolite and actinolite, particularly toxic forms of asbestos. Asbestos' needle-shaped fibers can remain in the lungs, causing disease decades after they are inhaled.

But the RJ Lee Group reported that its tests indicated 63 percent of the particles the EPA identified as "asbestos" contained too much aluminum to form asbestos fibers. The remaining 37 percent, the report said, were outside the range of particle dimensions specified in the regulatory definition of "asbestos."

The EPA, in a written statement, said many of the central claims in the RJ Lee report are similar to assertions the firm made as an expert hired by WR Grace Co., the defendant in litigation involving asbestos contamination in Libby, Mont.

The courts found for the EPA in that case, Johnson said.

Vicki Barber, county superintendent of schools, and representatives of the Rescue Union and Buckeye Union school districts, traveled to Washington, D.C., last month to discuss the RJ Lee report with lawmakers and regulators. Supervisor Charlie Paine said the EPA and RJ Lee reports are "180 degrees different."

"I don't have the expertise to say which is right," he said. "We need to evaluate which is correct because that determines what we do as a county."

He said it is important in assessing scientific reports to keep in mind who paid for them.

The supervisors noted that the county Office of Education submitted the RJ Lee report to three university-based experts who backed the consultant's findings. But Baumann said that for every list of experts who say one thing, there is a list of experts who disagree. Board members said it is important to accurately assess the risks, not only to protect public health, but to protect the county's economy.

Last summer, El Dorado County implemented a construction-dust monitoring program, along with more stringent dust-control measures to reduce risks emanating from naturally occurring asbestos. The supervisors said those measures will remain in place until more definitive data are available.

Board members also asked Gill to prepare a report on the economic impact of the measures, particularly increased costs for construction projects.

"In my book, the whole thing (economic impact) is worse than what you folks have said," board Chairman Jack Sweeney told fellow supervisors.

He said contractors have told him that costs are as much as 20 percent higher in El Dorado County than in surrounding areas.

Some of those measures were instituted following community meetings with the EPA and other agency representatives in June, which drew about 1,000 people. At the time, supervisors noted, the EPA promised to convene a panel of experts to evaluate how naturally occurring asbestos affects the lives and health of foothill residents.

The EPA later announced that it had abandoned that idea, along with a plan to measure asbestos exposure in other California communities with rocks containing the hazardous mineral.

Johnson said the EPA is reviewing the RJ Lee report and has requested assistance from experts with the U.S. Geological Survey in Denver. If errors are found in the EPA data, the risk assessment could be modified, she said.

However, Baumann argues in her letter to EPA regional administrator Nastri that the RJ Lee analysis indicates there are problems with the EPA samples themselves that may render any subsequent assessment invalid.

"The residents of El Dorado Hills will be ill served by having a premature risk assessment completed based on questionable samples," she said.

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