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## Asbestos critique baseless, EPA says

**By Chris Bowman -- Bee Staff Writer**

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In its most critical response yet, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has denounced as "seriously flawed" and deceptive a mining industry critique of the federal agency's El Dorado Hills asbestos testing.

The National Stone, Sand & Gravel Association's review of the 2004 air tests on Community Park playgrounds and nearby schoolyards largely contradicted the agency's findings of naturally occurring asbestos.

The EPA found none of the criticisms valid, according to its 17-page response released this week.

Overall, the industry's evaluation runs afoul of "widely accepted scientific standards" for sampling and measuring asbestos in the environment, the agency report said.

The point-by-point rebuttal also spotlights 10 instances where the industry consultant, R.J. Lee Group Inc. of Pittsburgh, omitted or mischaracterized key details when it said that its air tests "showed no significant exposure" to asbestos.

"The R.J. Lee Group's report misleads the public and muddles the message to the community," said Daniel Meer, the EPA's emergency response chief in San Francisco.

Rich Lee, president of R.J. Lee Group, called Meer's remarks "unfortunate." He stood by his critique: "We used only generally accepted scientific procedures in our analysis and review."

At issue is a decades-old standoff between public health scientists and the mining industry over the definition of "asbestos," a category of fibrous minerals.

At stake for the mining industry are regulatory constraints on a bedrock industry, figuratively and literally, which supplies sand and gravel for the building and highway industries.

For the EPA and other public health agencies, the misidentification of asbestos carries life-or-death consequences.

Development in rapidly growing El Dorado Hills and other foothill communities has churned up asbestos in the native rock and soil, releasing the breathable fibers into the air.

Fibers that get lodged in the lungs can lead to fatal respiratory disease years later.

The dispute centers on the identity of particles the EPA collected in October 2004 in air and soil sampling at Community Park and on playgrounds at Silva Valley Elementary, Jackson Elementary and Rolling Hills Middle School. Technicians wearing air monitors simulated dust-raising games such as baseball.

The EPA's findings, released last May, were striking: Every activity "significantly elevated" individual exposure to a form of asbestos called amphibole.

Most disease experts regard amphibole asbestos as many times more toxic in causing mesothelioma - a deadly cancer of the chest lining - than the more common chrysotile asbestos owners of older homes might see wrapped around pipes for insulation.

The mining lobby commissioned its \$81,000 review on behalf of the El Dorado County superintendent of schools, Vicki Barber, who has touted the report to dozens of officials.

Barber stops short of endorsing the mining report. But the critique fuels doubts she and many other local officials harbor over the reliability of EPA tests.

On the EPA's latest response, Barber said, "We are very pleased the dialogue is continuing and we are hopeful the questions we have asked will be addressed."

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