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Study: Asbestos fears are justified

USGS scientists debunk industry claim, call particles dangerous.

By Chris Bowman - Bee Staff Writer

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The U.S. Geological Survey on Tuesday confirmed a federal environmental agency's findings of a particularly dangerous kind of asbestos on playgrounds in El Dorado Hills.

USGS experts in mineral identification reached the conclusion after closely examining the playgrounds' study samples of tiny particles that the mining industry asserted were not asbestos.

The investigation found that most of those particles did not conform to the traditional commercial definition of asbestos, as the National Stone, Sand & Gravel Association had argued. The microscopic bits of minerals nonetheless were within scientists' widely accepted range of sizes, shapes and chemical compositions counted as "asbestos" for health studies, USGS scientists said.

"We don't equate the commercial definition of asbestos with toxicity," said Gregory Meeker, a mineralogist with the USGS Denver office who led the investigation. "It has not been health based. It's been for the guy who wants to mine a deposit and make a profit at it."

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials who conducted the October 2004 study of El Dorado Hills' Community Park and nearby schoolyards said the Geological Survey's findings affirmed its pioneering exposure studies of naturally occurring asbestos in El Dorado Hills and elsewhere in the country.

"The survey's study refutes assertions made by the R.J. Lee report and supports our findings and conclusions," said Dan Meer, who supervised the playgrounds' sampling by the EPA's San Francisco regional office.

Spokesman for the industry lobby could not be reached for comment late Tuesday. But the consultant who conducted the review of the EPA sampling had maintained that the environmental agency did not follow proper standards for identifying asbestos particles in air samples.

"It is too bad that they chose to ignore a very detailed analysis that we had provided to EPA and USGS," Rich Lee, president of R.J. Lee Group of Pittsburgh, said in July.

The EPA study found that children and adults in El Dorado Hills can significantly raise their exposure to breathable asbestos particles simply from the dust kicked up riding a bicycle or playing basketball on outdoor courts.

The main public health concern related to such exposures is mesothelioma, an inoperable and almost always fatal cancer of the membranes lining the chest and other body cavities, asbestos health experts say.

Short exposure -- months, not years -- can be enough to instigate the disease, though it typically takes 30 or more years to take hold.

The EPA strapped personal air monitors on agency technicians who mimicked children's activities at the park and on sports fields at Silva Valley Elementary, Jackson Elementary and Rolling Hills Middle schools.

About 1,000 of the El Dorado Hills' 31,000 residents packed the Community Park's gymnasium to learn more from federal scientists. Findings prompted the Community Services District to blacktop the New York Creek trail running through the park and increase irrigation on sports fields to cut dust. The

schools also adopted dust controls.

At the same, the superintendent of El Dorado County schools was widely circulating copies of the Stone, Sand & Gravel Association's critique discrediting the EPA study.

Superintendent Vicki Barber stopped short of endorsing the industry view. But she said it reinforced doubts that she and other local officials harbored over the reliability of EPA asbestos testing.

Barber declined to comment Tuesday, saying she had not yet read the full USGS report.

County Supervisor Helen Baumann, who represents El Dorado Hills, called the Geological Survey's study a "a fair analysis" and left her confident that the county is "doing everything we need to do to protect public health."

The USGS, the scientific arm of the Interior Department, launched the \$100,000 investigation at the request of the EPA, which wanted an independent examination of the industry critique.

Last April, the USGS team collected dozens of samples of rock, soil and settled dust in the areas where the environmental agency had conducted its asbestos exposure assessment.

USGS mineralogists also analyzed samples the EPA had collected using a number of sophisticated tests to determine the chemistry, mineral composition and form of the asbestos structures detected.

The USGS investigators said asbestos health experts, not the mining industry or mineralogists, need to take the lead in redefining asbestos from a health perspective.

"Ultimately, it is the health community that must determine what particle types are significant with respect to asbestos-related diseases," the report said.

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