

Rocky Mountain News

To print this page, select **File** then **Print** from your browser

URL: http://www.rockymountainnews.com/drmn/state/article/0,1299,DRMN_21_2375079,00.html

Asbestos alarm

184,000 Colorado houses might have toxic material

By **Todd Hartman, Rocky Mountain News**

October 25, 2003

Some 184,000 Colorado homes likely have insulation contaminated with a highly toxic form of asbestos responsible for hundreds of deaths in Montana and the subject of a nationwide EPA warning this year.

That estimate, developed by a lawyer leading a class-action case against the manufacturer, is conservative, because Denver was home to a plant that processed and distributed the asbestos-laced insulation - a geographic factor the lawyer said he didn't include in his calculation.

The insulation, sold as "Zonolite," was produced during two decades at Western Minerals, a factory in south Denver that was the target of an urgent cleanup this month by the Environmental Protection Agency after traces of a specific kind of asbestos were found on the surface and in the soil around the facility.

Zonolite was made of a mineral called vermiculite, mined from a mountain in Libby, Mont., since the 1920s. It wasn't until 1999 that the EPA discovered that the Libby vermiculite was laced with a particularly potent type of asbestos that has killed more than 200 miners, their family members and other residents in Libby.

Now, the EPA considers the vermiculite insulation so hazardous that in June it warned homeowners who suspect they have the product to avoid trips to their attics rather than risk stirring up the material and inhaling the deadly, microscopic asbestos fibers. Numerous studies have shown that Zonolite, even when only slightly disturbed, can release dangerously high levels of the fibers.

They can become lodged, or impaled upon, the lining of the lungs, scarring the tissue and leading to nightmarish and eventually fatal breathing disorders and diseases, including asbestosis, mesothelioma and lung cancer.

Investigators for the EPA determined that Western Minerals produced Zonolite insulation and possibly other vermiculite products between the late 1960s until about 1990 at its plant at 111 S. Navajo St. in Denver, an address near Interstate 25 and Alameda Avenue. The site is now owned by food giant Archer Daniels Midland, which processes corn syrup there.

Denver a distributor

Invoices and shipping records suggest that Western Minerals received at least 100,000 tons of vermiculite from the infamous Libby mine, owned by the multinational firm W.R. Grace. Just how much of that ended up as Zonolite, and how much of that ended up in Colorado attics is a question the EPA says it doesn't have the information to answer.

But Darrell Scott, a Spokane, Wash.-based lawyer bringing a class-action lawsuit against W.R. Grace for property damage associated with Zonolite, said he's developed an estimate for Colorado and many other states using the volume of vermiculite produced at Libby and state population figures. His figure for Colorado: 184,000 homes.

Advertisement



1-800-BAR NONE

Get Financed Today!

Everyone Deserves a Second Chance!!

Slow Pays - No Credit

Collections - Charge Off

Repossession - Tax Lien

1-800-BAR NONE

"Everyone deserves a second chance"

CREDIT APPLICATION
CLICK HERE

"We were trying to convince a court that there are a number of homes in each state and not exaggerate the number," said Scott, adding that his firm adjusts the numbers as it acquires more data. "We think our number is especially conservative for a place with a (processing plant)" and distribution plant, such as Denver.

Al Chubb, owner of Big Al's Insulating in Northglenn, believes that Scott's figures are "about right." An insulator in the metro area for 25 years, Chubb said he's come across many cases of vermiculite insulation but only learned how hazardous the material is after a reporter told him of the EPA's recent warning.

"If you find it in one house, sometimes the whole neighborhood has it," Chubb said. "Often it's the same builder, same contractors, you know."

Now Chubb fears that he has probably been exposed to the asbestos fibers. He said Zonolite creates extremely high dust levels - a complaint that mimics the way the vermiculite mine affected life in Libby, where what would prove to be toxic dust overwhelmed the mine, processing plant and even the air in other parts of town.

"That (stuff) is one of the dustiest jobs," Chubb said. "You come out just covered in black. I've probably been exposed big time. I should probably get checked out."

Chubb said he never heard the EPA warning this summer firsthand. What he heard secondhand led him to think the warning applied to a new kind of insulation, not a type that has been sitting in Colorado homes since at least the 1960s and probably before.

'Do not disturb insulation'

In fact, the EPA waited to issue the insulation warning until nearly four years after it first realized the scope of the disaster in Libby - an epidemic of asbestos-related deaths originally rooted out and reported by a Seattle newspaper reporter in November 1999.

The same reporter, now at the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, reported last December that the EPA was ready to warn the public about Zonolite three times in 2002, but that the White House Office of Management and Budget convinced the agency to hold off on warning millions of homeowners nationally that likely have the insulation.

According to the *Post-Dispatch*, which has reported extensively on the matter, the White House Office of Management and Budget said the EPA didn't push the issue and lacked "scientific proof" of Zonolite's hazards.

In the wake of the newspaper's reports, fierce congressional pressure mounted. By June of this year, the EPA and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry issued a statement alerting the public of the dangers of Zonolite.

"The main message to consumers is: 1) Do not disturb vermiculite attic insulation," the statement said. "Any disturbance has the potential to release asbestos fibers into the air."

Dan Thornton, an environmental scientist at EPA headquarters in Washington, D.C., was critical of efforts to estimate how much Zonolite sits in Colorado homes, or any other state.

In fact, Thornton has discouraged regional EPA officials, including those in Denver, from offering such estimates.

He says there are too many factors to consider, from how much of the material entered local markets, to how much raw vermiculite was converted to insulation instead of other products, to the varying application rates inside homes.

"By the time you're done, you've got so many caveats and amendments to your numbers that it's a wild guess," Thornton said. "In the beginning, I came up with an estimate and said, 'I have no faith in these numbers at all.' "

Libby deaths widespread

Critics, however, believe the EPA is hesitant to put numbers to the problem out of fears it could quantify the crisis and amplify the pressure on the agency, leaving it faced with a massive, nationwide cleanup problem potentially costing billions of dollars.

"Right now, the consequences on the horizon are so significant that there's a little head-in-the-sand attitude," said Scott, the class-action lawyer.

In the case of Libby, where the EPA has acknowledged that it significantly underestimated the problem, the agency last year declared the community a Superfund site and has targeted 1,300 homes so far for cleanup of attics or yards, where vermiculite was used as a soil amendment for gardening.

In August, a federal court in Montana ordered W.R. Grace to pay more than \$54 million to reimburse the government for its investigation and cleanup costs in Libby accrued through Dec. 31, 2001. The company may also be liable for further costs.

The Libby asbestos has proven so toxic, and exposure rates so high, that the EPA has been forced to rethink its entire approach to a killer once thought to be only an occupational hazard, not an environmental one.

In Libby, the asbestos has killed not only miners but also their wives, who inhaled it while washing clothes, and children, who played in piles of the asbestos-laced vermiculite ore.

Some people were apparently exposed simply by playing baseball at fields near a W.R. Grace processing plant.

"This is different than what people normally think of as asbestos," Scott said. "It's different in character, different in toxicity. It's many multiples more dangerous, and it wasn't on anybody's radar screen."

hartmant@RockyMountain News.com or (303) 892-5048

Copyright 2003, Rocky Mountain News. All Rights Reserved.