INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION

PRESS INFORMATION

History of asbestos-related issues in Minnesota

1972 - 1980: A federal lawsuit is filed against Reserve Mining Company over the disposal of taconite tailings into Lake Superior, leading to a trial lasting from April 1973 to April 1974. In June 1973, federal researchers indicate the tailings contain asbestos-like fibers. After many appeals on both sides, Reserve begins on-land disposal of tailings in March 1980 and improves air pollution controls at the Silver Bay facility. Several North Shore communities build water treatment plants.

1976: The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) establishes a tri-county cancer survey to monitor newly occurring cancers among residents in Cook, Lake and St. Louis Counties in Northeastern Minnesota from 1969-1976.

1976: W.C. Cooper study. (Airborne asbestiform minerals in the nonoccupational environment.)

1979: A.M. Langer, et al, study on fibers associated with Reserve's tailings. (The contamination of Lake Superior with amphibole gangue minerals.)

1980: T.C. Clark, et al, study on the morbidity and mortality of taconite workers. (Respiratory effects of exposure to dust in taconite mining and processing.)

1981: A.C. Hilding et al, study on the effects of ingesting fibers associated with tailings. (Biological effects of ingested amosite asbestos, taconite tailings, diatomaceous earth and Lake Superior water in rats.)

Early 1980s: The University of Minnesota School of Public Health, with support from the Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Board and cooperation of the seven iron mining companies, creates the Mineral Resources Health Assessment Program (MRHAP) to study the health of iron miners and assembles a data base of about 72,000 people who had worked in the mining industry from the 1930s through1983.

1983: I.T. Higgins, et al, study. (Mortality of Reserve Mining Company employees in relation to taconite dust exposure.)

March 1984: W.C. Cooper, et al, study. (An epidemiologic study of workers in the taconite mining and milling industry.)

October 1984: The MDH and the University of Minnesota jointly sponsor a one-day seminar titled Physical and Biological Properties and Health Hazards of Asbestiform Fibers.

1985: A Virginia, Minnesota, physician reports possible lung abnormalities, leading to concern about generalized environmental contamination. As a result, MDH assembles a national panel, known as the Range Studies Advisory Committee. The panel doesn't concur with the finding of abnormalities, determines there is not a widespread health risk and recommends occupational studies, x-rays of Iron Range workers and the development of a statewide cancer registry.

1986: Cooper, et al, follow-up study.

1986: J. Sheehy study on exposures to silica in the taconite industry in the early 1980s. (Reconstruction of occupational exposures to silica containing dusts in the taconite industry.)

1988: W.C. Cooper, et al. (Mortality of workers in two Minnesota taconite mining and milling operations.)

1988: A state law requires the MDH to conduct medical screening of workers and spouses at Cloquet's Conwed plant, which made asbestos tile. The screening finds lung abnormalities in 19% of male workers and an excess of asbestos-related cancers.

1989-1994: MDH identifies 6,000 former Conwed workers with possible asbestos exposure and notifies nearly 5,000 of them of the health risks involved.

1991: Cooper, et al. (An updated analysis of mortality in a cohort of Minnesota taconite millers and miners.)

1992: Cooper, et al. (An updated study of taconite miners and millers exposed to silica and non-asbestiform amphiboles.)

1997: MDH's Minnesota Cancer Surveillance System reports a 70% excess of mesothelioma in men in Northeastern Minnesota.

1998: Legislature appropriates money for the Occupational Respiratory Disease Information System (ORDIS) to, among other things, investigate the occurrence of mesothelioma in Northeastern Minnesota.

1999: R. P. Nolan, et al, study. (A risk assessment for exposure to grunerite asbestos [amosite] in an iron ore mine.)

1999: In response to concern about asbestos-contaminated vermiculite, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency conducts investigation, risk assessment and clean up in and around a Libby, Montana, vermiculite mine and processing plant.

2000: Asbestos is found in samples taken from the Western Mineral Products plant site in northeast Minneapolis. Because the general public used free waste rock from the site for years, residential properties are inspected; ultimately, 260 properties require remediation.

2001: MDH begins investigation of community environmental exposure to asbestos-contaminated vermiculite. The plant site is cleaned up in Fall 2001.

2001: Federal officials investigate health effects of vermiculite mining and asbestos contamination in Libby. Medical screening of townspeople in Libby shows abnormalities of the lining of the lung in 18% of participants, compared to 0.2% to 2.3 on other US groups with no known asbestos exposure.

2001: MDH begins study to determine health risks of residents of Northeast Minneapolis exposed vermiculite containing up to 10 percent tremolite asbestos that was processed at the WR Grace/Western Mineral Products plant (largely into Zonolite for use as insulation). The ore was mined at Libby.

2003: MDH begins notifying members of the Northeast Minneapolis community who were identified as being exposed to asbestos-containing vermiculite.

March 2003: MDH mesothelioma report is released. The report indicates the explanation most consistent with the study's findings is that commercial asbestos exposure, rather than taconite dust, is the most likely cause for the occurrence of mesothelioma in men employed in the mining industry.