

Environmental Health Assessment Program (EHAP)

FAST FACTS

April 2008

Summary fact sheet for the former Vermiculite Northwest facility

New health report:

A new health consultation report about the former Vermiculite Northwest processing plant in North Portland has concluded that the current site is not a public health hazard, and that clean-up actions are complete. The report's findings are based on final clearance testing conducted by EPA at the site in 2006.

The Oregon Environmental Health Assessment Program (EHAP) reports that, although workers employed in businesses at the facility may have been exposed to asbestos in the past, final clean-up actions have eliminated the risk of exposure and *no apparent health hazard* exists for people working at or visiting businesses currently located the site.

What is the site's background?

- For nearly 50 years, the former Vermiculite Northwest facility processed vermiculite in its facility at 2302 N. Harding St. in Portland. The facility received some asbestos-contaminated vermiculite ore from Libby, Montana.
- The Portland facility exfoliated (expanded or "popped") vermiculite to manufacture attic insulation, processing more than 193,000 tons of vermiculite from Libby.
- After the former Portland Vermiculite Northwest plant stopped processing vermiculite, the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) cleaned the building in 2001. The owner converted the facility into four businesses.
- New information about asbestos fiber toxicity prompted a closer look at the site shortly after it was cleaned in 2001. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) revisited the site for further testing in August 2005 and found that asbestos fibers were still detectable throughout the building.
- The current building owner hired a certified asbestos abatement contractor supervised by the EPA to remove any residual contamination. Clean-up was completed in 2006.

Things to know about asbestos:

There are low levels of asbestos in nearly all air samples. Urban background levels are higher than levels in rural areas. Levels can fluctuate due to activities such as demolition and renovation.

Asbestos is a *known human carcinogen*, meaning it can cause cancer, especially in the lungs. Exposure to asbestos does not necessarily mean that a person will become ill from that exposure, but repeated and prolonged exposure to high levels of asbestos increase the chances of developing lung cancer and breathing problems. When asbestos fibers are inhaled, they can remain in the lungs for a lifetime.

Smoking combined with asbestos exposure greatly increases the risk of lung cancer, which can develop in 10-30 years. Quitting or never starting smoking is the single most important action a person exposed to asbestos can take. **If you think you have been exposed to asbestos, you should inform your doctor.**

To learn more about asbestos, visit the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry's Web site at www.atsdr.cdc.gov/asbestos/.

Could I have been exposed to asbestos from this site in the past?

You were probably exposed to asbestos from this site if you:

- Worked at this facility when it processed vermiculite;
- Lived with someone who worked at the facility when vermiculite was processed there;
- Came into contact with waste products from the site.

What if I had a business at the site before it was cleaned the second time?

Asbestos fibers were present at the site prior to the last clean-up in 2006. However, the data available from the 2004 and 2005 samplings did not provide the type of information used to determine the human health risks associated with working or visiting the site before 2006.

Why can't you determine the risk to my health?

Sampling conducted in 2004 and 2005 were designed to help the EPA decide what clean-up actions to take. The tests did not give us information to determine human exposures and health risks.

As concluded in EHAP's previous health consultation, workers employed in businesses occupying the facility prior to the final clean-up in June 2006 may have been exposed to asbestos. However, the Environmental Health Assessment Program cannot determine the public health hazard because we do not have sufficient data to make a determination.

Where can I get more information?

A complete copy of the current report, as well as our past report, is available on the Web at www.healthoregon.org/ehap. For further information, please contact Julie Early-Alberts, EHAP coordinator, Oregon Public Health Division, at 971-673-1210.