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El Dorado Hills asbestos levels contradicted

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There may be some good news for El Dorado Hills residents who were rattled by the reported asbestos levels a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency study purported to find in 2004. That will depend, of course, if the findings of a recent peer review are allowed to stand.

RJ Lee Group Inc. was hired last September by the National Stone, Sand and Gravel Association on behalf of the El Dorado Hills Office of Education to perform a peer review of the EPA results, which found naturally occurring asbestos fibers to be present in both the soil and background air.

The peer review, however, contradicted these results, claiming that 63 percent of the amphibole particles identified as asbestos fibers "can not be asbestos," and that soil samples did not contain the amphibole minerals either.

The review further stated the EPA used a method that could not "distinguish between asbestos fibers and non-asbestos cleavage fragments."

Dr. Vicki Barber, El Dorado County Superintendent of Schools, was among a local delegation that flew to Washington D.C. last month to meet with EPA officials and Congressional representatives regarding the findings.

Barber explained the EPA used a device that operates off the base assumption that asbestos particles exist and simply tries to measure the levels.

"It actually makes sense to us," Barber said of the RJ Lee findings, noting the community's cancer rates are below the norm and that asbestos-related health issues aren't at the levels that would be anticipated if the EPA's findings were accurate.

"It's not to say that there isn't natural occurring asbestos that should be of concern," added Barber.

After a May school board meeting in which the EPA presented the alarming findings, Barber said she was approached by a parent and geologist who suggested she approach the association about financing a peer review, which the district was not in a position to fund.

The school board has since paid \$2,000 for a peer review of the RJ Lee peer review.

"We just wanted to make sure that it would be taken seriously," Barber said of the new findings.

The second review included University of Maryland geology professor Dr. Ann Wylie, minerals consultant Dr. Malcolm Ross and Dr. Arthur Langer of the University of the City of New York.

"I have concerns, not on the RJ Lee Report itself, but rather on the overall strategy of the EPA El Dorado Hills project, and particularly on the method of soil and air sampling, the lack of proper reference samples, the lack of cancer risk estimates, and the lack of an overview of asbestos emissions in all California ophiolite terrain," Ross wrote in his peer review letter. "As mentioned above, the lack of an asbestos risk estimate makes the mass of data collected in El Dorado Hills useless in informing the residents of their true cancer risk."

"Frankly, it must be considered flawed and its limitations recognized," Langer wrote.

The EPA will take 60 to 90 days to conduct a federal review of the new findings, said Barber. EPA officials did not return calls in time for comment.

Asked if the EPA was to stand by its findings, Barber responded, "If the EPA's perspective would stand ... your risks in this community would be much higher. ... Our schools would have to look at much higher mitigation and cost."

El Dorado Hills' new Lakeview Elementary, which opened its doors last year, has already spent an additional \$2 million on mitigation costs, while Folsom High School has spent \$5 million, said Barber.

"Look at the school bonds (the Governor is talking about). You can see how quickly those dollars are going to be eaten up by mitigation."

Development costs have risen 25 to 30 percent because of recent dust mitigation measures, the superintendent explained, "so the economic impact is huge, (and) not just in our community."

At a recent El Dorado Irrigation District meeting, board member George Wheeldon brought up the study in connection to a construction contract for the new Silva Valley Parkway water main. Wheeldon voiced his concerns over construction costs tied to asbestos mitigation, especially because "this new study, conducted by a highly credible firm that has actually consulted for EPA and other government agencies, shows there may not be a problem."

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