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Asbestos test results set for April release

The EPA is expected to reveal data from 500 samples taken at schools, park in El Dorado Hills.

By Walter Yost -- Bee Staff Writer
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The Environmental Protection Agency has picked a tentative date to discuss test results for naturally occurring asbestos at three school sites and a community park in El Dorado Hills.

Officials of the federal agency reserved the El Dorado Hills Community Services District gymnasium for the April 22 public meeting. An exact time for the evening meeting hasn't been determined.

Jere Johnson, EPA site assessment manager, told members of the local asbestos Citizens Advisory Group on Wednesday that her agency hopes to have enough test samples validated by the meeting date.

"We're still getting data back. We're still taking a look at it," Johnson said. More than 500 test samples were gathered last fall.

A fact sheet on the test results will be mailed to the El Dorado Hills community within the next two weeks, she said.

The EPA conducted activity-based air and soil sampling to gauge residents' exposure to naturally occurring asbestos, especially children's exposure.

Samples were collected on the dirt baseball diamonds and children's playground at the El Dorado Hills Community Park and on sports fields at Jackson and Silva elementary schools and Rolling Hills Middle School.

Technicians wearing protective suits and carrying portable air monitors simulated typical outdoor recreation at the sites. Sampling at the three school sites was done on weekends when students weren't on campus.

EPA officials said they don't know whether the test sites contain asbestos but suspect the areas could be contaminated based on their proximity to the West Bear Mountains Fault. Asbestos sometimes forms in narrow cracks caused by movements along earthquake faults.

EPA officials say the test results should give El Dorado Hills residents a better idea, but not certainty, about their exposure or risk of disease.

Some members of the Citizens Advisory Group debated holding a public meeting before all the test results have been validated.

El Dorado Hills resident Al Vargas questioned whether scheduling the meeting April 22 was "too ambitious."

"We will go to the public even if we don't have all the data," Johnson replied. "We can't sit on data for six months until every 'i' is dotted."

Chris Anaya, another committee member, said informational fliers should be distributed to students at all three schools before the meeting.

Silva Valley and Rolling Hills are in the Buckeye Union School District, and Jackson School is in the Rescue Union School District.

"People with children are the ones who have the biggest interest," Anaya said.

Scientists say children are especially vulnerable to health risks from exposure to naturally occurring asbestos because their breathing rate is higher and their breathing zone is closer to the ground.

Naturally occurring asbestos does not pose a health threat if left undisturbed, but when it is released into the air through grading and construction, it can raise the risk of cancer.

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