Has EPA dropped the ball?

Ochsner official says asbestos cleanup rules too lax

By BOB ANDERSON
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Medical evidence shows that even small amounts of asbestos in the air can cause cancer and other severe health problems, but critics of state and federal asbestos programs say little is being done to correct the problem.

State and federal regulations on asbestos “aren’t worth the paper they are written on,” says Ross Vincent of the Ecology Center in New Orleans. “The Environmental Protection Agency has dropped the ball” by leaving the question of asbestos in schools to the localschoolboards rather than forcing cleanup, says Dr. Victor Alexander, head of occupational medicine at Ochsner Clinic in New Orleans.

EPA should immediately upgrade its regulations to require inspection of all public and commercial buildings and removal of all asbestos that poses a danger, says a report by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

“It’s absolutely essential that the Environmental Protection Agency, Congress and the citizens in this country have an accurate idea of the total extent of the problem in the United States,” the AFSCME report states.

Vincent says the state and federal regulations on asbestos skirt the most important issues and provide ridiculously liberal standards in the areas they do regulate.

EPA requires schools to inspect for asbestos but does not require the schools to report their findings to EPA or to correct asbestos dangers, he says. The state has no regulations at all dealing with asbestos in schools.

Vincent agrees that the state shouldn’t wait for EPA’s lead, because EPA has been woefully slow in saying the agency felt that once it forced school systems to conduct inspections that public opinion would force school boards to take immediate action.

In some cases that has worked, in others it has not, he says.

Meacham says EPA is considering issuing stronger regulations on asbestos, particularly in school systems.

Pat Norton, head of the Department of Environmental Quality, says she has instructed her toxic air pollutant section to draw up regulations forcing schools to correct their asbestos problems.

“I don’t see why we should wait for EPA,” she says.

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attending to the problem. Instead of taking strong action to remedy what it has long realized to be a major health problem, EPA has sat back and hoped that local governments would deal with the situation, says Vincent.

Unfortunately, local governments and school officials don't realize what a serious problem they are dealing with, so little has gotten done, he says.

"The EPA has the authority, the ability and the ultimate responsibility to address and correct this very serious health hazard in our schools and elsewhere," says the AFSCME report.

While state regulations do not now force action on existing asbestos, they do cover demolition and renovation projects in which asbestos is involved.

The regulations require that the asbestos be wet and properly disposed of and that state air quality officials be notified so they can inspect the area to protect workers and bystanders.

However, the state is only notified in 10 to 15 percent of the jobs, says Bill Davis of DEQ's toxic air pollutants program. "That indicates to me that a lot of work is being done by people who don't know what they're doing," he said.

There are lots of small contractors that aren't even aware of asbestos regulations and whose workers are being exposed without proper equipment, says Vincent.

"The inspection activities and work procedures endemic across the country show a shocking disregard by management of the severe health effects of asbestos exposure to workers, school children and the public," says Gerald McEntee, president of AFSCME.

"Based on our findings, AFSCME believes an asbestos emergency exists," says McEntee. "Asbestos-related disease is totally man-made and, therefore, totally preventable."

The AFSCME survey found that asbestos was present in hospitals, prisons, mental health institutions, office buildings, libraries and almost every other category of building.

"Most of the asbestos present in public buildings is in bad shape - flaking, damaged physically or by water, drilled, cut or deteriorating," AFSCME says in a study on public health in public buildings.

EPA should require that all public and commercial buildings be inspected for asbestos and that workers and occupants of buildings where asbestos is found be notified, AFSCME says.

EPA should also require removal of all easily crumbled asbestos found in public and commercial buildings and require that workers be properly protected while the removal is being conducted, the report continues.

"The asbestos problem in this country is indeed an emergency of massive proportions which urgently requires a response by the federal government," AFSCME says.

Dr. William Nicholson, a nationally recognized expert on asbestos, has urged EPA to promulgate regulations requiring action on asbestos found in schools.

"Without strong direction from the EPA, intolerable conditions and unacceptable risks will continue to exist in some schools," Dr. Nicholson said.

"A state-by-state or piecemeal approach" to the asbestos problem is not enough, says Mary Futrell, president of the National Education Association.

She said a federal mandate is necessary, but that such a mandate must be handled with some means of federal funding or it could bankrupt some school systems.

The NEA has asked Congress to create a "superfund" to pay for asbestos cleanups.

One educator has estimated to Congress that it will cost about $250 million to encapsulate the asbestos in the nation's schools and about $2.5 billion to remove it.

The costs are high today to control the problem, but the costs will be much higher later if nothing is done, Dr. Alexander says.