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Minnesota Communities Asked to Filter Water

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DULUTH, Minn., March 24—A Federal judge has urged this city and other Minnesota communities on Lake Superior to install filtration facilities capable of removing injurious asbestos fibers from their drinking water. If the facilities are not installed, Judge Miles Lord said, the communities face the possibility of increased cases of cancer and other fiber-induced diseases.

Judge Lord told 120 Duluth residents and local officials here Friday that microscopic fibers were being discharged into the lake in great numbers by the Reserve Mining Company and that the only quick means to abate a "very substantial public health menace" was to have efficient water filtration.

"If we can't get water filtration in here," the judge said, "I'm going to close the plant. And those people will be out of work."

Since late 1955, Reserve has discharged 67,000 tons of taconite wastes daily into Lake Superior from its processing plant at Silver Bay, Minn., a village 50 miles northeast of Duluth. About half of the mining company's 3,100 employes work at the plant, making Reserve a major factor in the region's economy.

For almost eight months, Judge Lord has been presiding over a District Court trial in Minneapolis in which the Federal Government and nine other plaintiffs have contended that Reserve's discharge was the source of the asbestos fibers and that the tiny materials were carried by lake currents to Duluth and other communities along the western arm of Lake Superior.

He spoke yesterday in the Federal Courthouse here at a public hearing that he had called to alert area residents to the problem.

Judge Lord has said that he will order Reserve to halt the discharge and that the only question is when he will set a specific deadline for an end to the 18-year-old practice.

However, he has said that he does not believe that residents who use Lake Superior drinking water share fully his concern about the apparent health threat from the fibers. His visit was intended, he said, to alert residents and to "build a bonfire under those responsible for filtering the water."

Environmental and health officials told the judge filtration facilities could be installed on a short-term basis to remove from 80 to 90 per cent of the fibers from municipal water supplies. However, Francis Mayo, Middle West regional director of the United States Environmental Protection Agency, said that construction of more permanent and extensive facilities that could remove more than 90 per cent of the fibers would take three years.

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