

Fred LeBrun

Asbestos problem up in the air

Asbestos.

Next to Lucky Strikes and Camels, no word in the modern environmental lexicon strikes greater fear in the hearts and lungs of the health-conscious.

I remember when Mr. Benjamin put the siding on our house, big white shingles of asbestos that he nailed up all in a row. He said my father was a very smart man for putting up asbestos because it wouldn't have to be painted (which turned out to be a lie), wasn't flammable (but the wood underneath was) and would last 50 years (all too true). A lot of people in the 1950s thought asbestos had an unlimited future. We just didn't know.

But as the great Inspector Clouseau said after taking an ax to a grand piano a dowager had just proclaimed a priceless Steinway, "Not anymore."

Think asbestos now and it conjures up the image of a zillion lawsuits, of cadaverously thin ex-factory workers slowly, painfully dying of asbestosis, of men in spacesuits going into schools to remove and dispose of the stuff as if it was nuclear waste. The cost of officially undoing what we didn't know was a problem is proving to be staggering for schools and public buildings, and the bill for it is years away from being totaled, let alone paid.

With this as the modern backdrop for what asbestos means, the situation in Green Island might raise an eyebrow or two.

Allied Bendix, which makes brake linings, has applied for a permit to throw a maximum of 2.6 tons of asbestos into the atmosphere a year. For the last 50 years, the company has been tossing three tons a year up in the air. Good lord, you say, these people must be breaking every law there is. Well, that's the curious part. They aren't.

In fact, Bendix is well within all the current Environmental Protection Agency and state guidelines; and in general, the state Department of Environmental Conservation, which has to issue the permit, probably will. Curiously, the EPA has put tight restrictions on the use of asbestos in many products, but not in brake linings.

It seems that if some environmental activists in Rensselaer County hadn't created a flap, it was more than likely that Bendix would have gotten its permit without a hitch, without tests, without much question. Bear in mind that EnCon is rather limited in what it can do since Bendix isn't breaking any laws.

However, overseers at the state Health Department who were made aware of the asbestos emissions have raised some questions and want to test air quality in the environs.

That, of course, is the bottom line: the health hazard. Getting data will not be as difficult as some who are denigrating the possible impact say, but what is assured is this: The various factions are not likely to agree on what the data means.

This goes back to the general health risk posed by asbestos. No one in his right mind wants to take unnecessary chances, but at what point is a risk a risk? After all, asbestos is a natural substance, a mineral, and fibers float around in the air even without Bendix.

Craig Larsen, a Bendix spokesman, makes a plausible defense for his company, the best point being that the plant will be 95 percent asbestos-free by 1994. He says they follow every regulation and stay on the safe side; he claims that the type of asbestos used is the least harmful known and that in some European countries is separated from other forms of asbestos and considered safe. He points to two health studies of employees going back to the 1950s that show no unusual health problems associated with working at Bendix.

Craig does not have health statistics for those unfortunates living downwind of the Bendix stacks, although we understand the county Health Department is looking into it.

John Hawley of the state Health Department is the man who has raised the need for some evaluation. He's a scientist, a cautious man, and says "one in a million" is the figure that sometimes emerges when discussing significant carcinogenic risk. Is the Bendix emission likely to produce plus or minus that? Hard to say, until we test the air, and even then what do we know?

At the moment, there is no standard for what the ordinary air holds in the air streams around Green Island, Hawley points out.

So, just like back in the time of Mr. Benjamin, we don't know more than we do know. We can guess that 2.6 tons of asbestos in the air can't be doing us any good. But is it killing us? And, if it is, what are we going to do about it?

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