

Scientists Fail To Label Talc Fibers as Asbestos

By Alan Emory
Times Washington Correspondent

WASHINGTON — A National Bureau of Standards analysis of 80 talc samples shows 12 of the 13 from the R.T. Vanderbilt Co. contain fibers which scientists can not specifically identify as asbestos.

Of the 13 Vanderbilt samples, four are clearly labeled as from the Gouverneur, N.Y., Mill No. 1, another seems likely to be from there and a sixth sample is also a strong probability.

The bureau report says that, since the definition of asbestos is to be investigated as part of a longer study, the result in the current analysis could not possibly be interpreted in terms of asbestos.

The variations in results raised several questions about the procedure used by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in identifying asbestos in talc, the bureau said. OSHA has notified its field offices that Vanderbilt talc contains asbestos, but

the company has disputed the findings.

The Standards Bureau said that OSHA procedures, especially sampling, even under favorable circumstances, could be useful only for determining "fiber" content — not "asbestos" content.

A careful analysis might make it possible to identify some of the fibers as asbestos, the report said, but the problem of defining asbestos would still remain. OSHA defines asbestos by the length-to-width ratio of the fibers in the talc.

The Bureau of Standards said that it believed resolution of the measurement problem, including defining and identifying asbestos, "will be accomplished only by significant changes in the procedure and probably the method as well."

Tucked back in an appendix to the report is the disclosure that OSHA changed its laboratory procedure for analyzing talc samples at its Salt Lake City, Utah, operation last June 2 after the labs were visited by "a re-

presentative of the Vanderbilt Talc Co."

The report quoted OSHA's Willard Dixon, who is in charge of microscopic analysis of samples for "asbestos" fiber content, as saying the change in analytical procedure on June 2, 1976, "was induced by the discussion with technologists from the Vanderbilt Co." He said the Vanderbilt experts convinced him of the merits of a system of distinguishing between "tremolite asbestos" and "talc fibers."

Vanderbilt produces tremolitic talc at its Gouverneur operation.

The report says fibers were identified by both analysts in talc from packer station 3, Mill 1, at the first shift Nov. 4, 1975, at Gouverneur; from packer station 2, same shift, same date; bagging station 3, same mill, same date; two bagging stations, same mill, second shift, Nov. 3, 1975, and at seven other unidentified Vanderbilt Co. locations.

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One analyst found fibers at another point on what seemed to be the Nov. 4, 1975, first shift at Mill 1, but a second analyst did not find fibers from that sample on the first scan.

There seemed to be some confusion, also, on two of the samples on which both analysts found fibers in Vanderbilt talc because the results did not conform.

The Bureau report said that to complete the assignment OSHA made Sept. 1, when the analysis was requested, it would have to reach "an acceptable definition of asbestos and to develop the necessary measurement techniques and standards. Once that has been achieved, a more meaningful analysis of the 80 OSHA-supplied talc samples can be accomplished."

Asst. Labor Secretary Eula Bingham, who heads OSHA, said the purpose of the study was to determine the fiber content of industrial talcs and "thereby answer parties regulated by OSHA who challenged data of both OSHA and the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)."

NIOSH studies led to a finding that nine job categories at Gouverneur were subjected to unduly high concentrations of dust and were hazardous to those occupying them.

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