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Town's roads contaminated with asbestos

By Jane Kay

EXAMINER ENVIRONMENTAL WRITER

COPPEROPOLIS, Calaveras County — Tony Krajnovich's pick-up truck hauls along the gravel road, sending thick clouds of a grayish-white dust into the air.

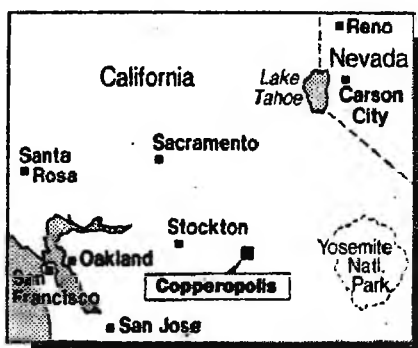
His niece Meagen Coil's stroller created the same dull gray puffs of road powder when her mother and father wheeled her on daily walks in the first year of her life.

Last month her parents, Paula and Billy Coil, learned with the rest of this little Forty-Niner town that the road in front of their house contains high levels of the cancer-causing mineral, asbestos.

The Environmental Protection Agency suspects that the road fill came from the largest chrysotile asbestos mine in the United States, which lies outside Copperopolis.

The town's 16 miles of contaminated road are the first that the EPA has found in the West, but the agency suspects there may be hundreds more such sites.

In the High Sierra, the same geologic activity that peppered the Mother Lode with gold nuggets also produced deposits of fibrous serpentine. Serpentine, California's state rock, contains asbestos.



temporary measure to halt a health-endangering exposure.

The final solution will be to permanently pave the 16 miles in the 500-resident development, Copper Cove Village, at a cost of more than \$1 million.

More striking are the implications of the EPA cleanup.

Mining officials agree with the EPA that tailings containing high levels of asbestos were used to build roadbeds in hundreds of locations in California. Fifteen counties once had asbestos mines, even though only two mines remain open — in Calaveras and San Benito counties.

Thousands more roads contain lower levels of asbestos in road-paving materials.

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Paula Coil, standing outside her

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ROADS

—From B-1

watched a truck followed by a cloud of dust go by on the road.

"Don't anybody breathe," she said to her family gathered around her. Meagen is 20 months, and the baby, Elizabeth, is 5 months.

"Meagen's grown up here. Do we panic and lock her in the house?"

"You think of the times you took her for walks in the stroller. The damage has been done. How do you correct it?"

"Now I wonder what drifts over here from the blasting at the mine six miles away."

"Our furniture, our car are covered with the same fine powder. At the Save Mart in Sonoma, a woman was helping me out with the groceries. She looked at the car and asked if I lived near a cement plant. I said I lived at Copperopolis, and she said, 'Oh, that's asbestos.' Will that stop when the road is paved?" Coil asked.

A Calaveras County health official in San Andreas, Dr. Robert Marshall, warned residents to drive slowly on the development roads and keep windows and vents closed in the car.

Last week EPA officials said some parts of the road had been built with fill made up of 20 percent asbestos.

Federal health officials are concerned when the fibers make up even 1 percent of the volume of total material, Terry Brubaker, chief of the EPA emergency response section in San Francisco, said last week.

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The mineral has been used in 3,000 products in the United States



Examiner/Katy Raddatz

Meagen Coil, 20 months, on the road outside her house that is heavily laced with asbestos

including ceiling tiles, insulation, gloves, hair dryers, brake lining and packing and pipe covering, and is now banned or proposed for banning in all of them.

Thousands of workers who inhaled the tiny, hard fibers have died from asbestosis, a disabling lung disorder that can cause breathing difficulty. Linked to asbestos exposure are mesothelioma, a cancer of the membranes that line the chest or abdominal cavity, and cancer of the lung, esophagus, stomach, colon and rectum.

According to federal health officials, the effects of asbestos exposure among workers may not be evident for up to 30 years or longer.

The risk of disease usually increases with the amount of asbestos-dust exposure and the length of time that a person has been ex-

posed, although brief exposures of as little as a month may produce disease.

Reports of asbestos-linked death among shipyard workers had already been made public by the time the Copper Cove Village was developed in 1969 by the Great Lakes Development Co. on the former site of the 5,000-acre Mitchell family ranch.

Asbestos tunnel mining began at the current mine site at Central

Ferry Road in the early 1990s, according to historian and Calaveras Chamber of Commerce President Charles "Sonny" Stone.

The current open-pit site was started in 1962 by Pacific Asbestos Co., which also had a mill and a manufacturing plant. According to a former employee, a Pittsburgh, Pa., company, I.L.K. Porter Inc., took controlling interest in 1968 or 1969.

Keith Garrity, H.K. Porter's chairman and chief operating offi-

cer, was not in the office last week and could not be reached for comment.

In 1975, the site was purchased by the current owners, Calaveras Asbestos Ltd., according to Michael Dell'Orto, director of purchasing, who has been an employee since 1967.

The company's position is that the roads were built before it purchased the assets from Pacific and, thus, it has no liability.

Dell'Orto said the company produces about 36,000 tons a year of asbestos product, which is used primarily for asbestos-cement siding and water and sewer pipes.

The EPA's proposed ban of asbestos and asbestos products several months ago "almost killed us in the marketplace. No one wants to buy it and get stuck with it," Dell'Orto said.

In addition to the loss to U.S. mine owners, the developing countries that rely on asbestos-cement pipe as a cheaper alternative to steel or PVC pipe will suffer from a mining ban, he said.

Dell'Orto estimates that 1,000 people have worked at the mine in the last 20 years. The company employs 173 people — and 200 at a time in previous years — and the turnover is very high, he said. He has only known one person who has had lung cancer, he said.

But in 1973, Dr. Irving Selikoff, the pioneer asbestos researcher from Mount Sinai Medical Center in

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g Selikoff,
researcher
d Center in

New York, ran tests on 64 Calaveras
mill workers. They showed that 39
percent of the individuals had ab-
normal chest X-rays, according to
press reports in 1978.

Selikoff warned that because as-
bestos-linked illnesses take 15 to 30
years to develop, the workers might
show signs of serious disease much
later.

Dell'Orto believes that the mon-
ey spent on pollution controls have
made the industry safe.

But federal health officials dis-
agree. They say the fibers are so
small that no protective equipment
could be developed that would pro-
tect the workers and the public.

In the close-knit community of
Copperopolis, people are calm over
the road scare, even though they
think they know who ordered the
asbestos for the roads, who sold it
and who hauled it.

The EPA is seeking that informa-
tion.

Under Superfund, the agency
has sent letters to five potentially
responsible parties. The agency is
seeking information and agree-
ments to pay cleanup costs from
anyone who was responsible for
creating the hazard, even though it
was not illegal at the time.

If that fails, under a \$150 million
appropriation from Congress,
which extended the Superfund law
until the end of May, the EPA will
seek to build a new road in Copper-
opolis.

