

EPA to Ban Nearly All Uses of Asbestos by 1997

By John Lancaster
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Ending nearly two decades of debate over one of the nation's most pervasive environmental health hazards, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator William K. Reilly yesterday announced plans to ban virtually all uses of asbestos by 1997.

The ban will prohibit the importation, manufacture and processing of asbestos, a fibrous, heat-resistant material widely used in construction and industry for most of this century. Asbestos fibers, which are

light and easily inhaled, have been linked to serious respiratory ailments including lung cancer and mesothelioma, an incurable cancer of the chest and abdomen.

"This is pollution prevention. We're eliminating a known cancer-causing substance from the marketplace," Reilly said in a statement.

A key ingredient in everyday items from brake linings to insulation, asbestos has become one of the nation's most pressing environmental health threats. Countless shipyard and construction workers have been exposed to the substance

since World War II, and the federal government is spending millions of dollars to identify and remove it from the nation's schools.

Asbestos workers filed a massive personal-injury lawsuit against one of the world's largest manufacturers of asbestos insulation, forcing the Denver-based Marvill Corp. into bankruptcy in 1982.

The nation now uses about 94,000 tons of asbestos each year, far below the 700,000-ton annual levels of the mid-1970s but still cause for worry, according to EPA officials.

Reilly noted that despite past efforts to control asbestos, "our health and that of our children is still threatened by the continued release into the environment of virtually indestructible asbestos fibers from products being sold today." He said asbestos is responsible for 3,000 to 12,000 cancer deaths each year.

EPA officials estimate that the asbestos ban will cost consumers about \$460 million over the next 13 years, mostly in the form of higher prices for substitute materials, and

will save 200 lives in the same period. That works out to about \$2.3 million per life saved, the EPA noted.

Bob Pigg, president of the Asbestos Information Association, a trade group, questioned the logic of that equation. "When you look at 50,000 automobile deaths and 140,000 lung cancer deaths from smoking each year, this gives you a perspective on the minimal risk from current uses of asbestos," he said.

Nevertheless, environmentalists hailed the ban as a significant across-the-board prohibition on a specific, widely used substance. The EPA has used its regulatory power in a similar manner just once before, when it banned the manufacture of "non-essential" aerosol sprays containing chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) in 1973, officials said.

"We view it as a very positive step," said Karen Florini, an attorney with the Environmental Defense Fund. "We think it indicates that Administrator Reilly is putting into practice his statements about the importance of pollution prevention. Our only regret is that it didn't happen several years ago," she added.

The government and the EPA in particular have long been accused of delaying action on asbestos despite compelling evidence of its cancer-causing properties. The EPA first identified asbestos as a "hazardous air pollutant" in 1972, and the regulatory process that culminated in yesterday's announcement began in 1979.

In 1986, a congressional inquiry concluded that the Office of Management and Budget had delayed

efforts to ban asbestos by exerting undue pressure on EPA officials.

At a news conference yesterday, Reilly appeared to acknowledge the delay, telling reporters, "The first question I had [was] why has this been around for so long? We don't want to spend our entire careers on one of these rule-makings."

Asbestos was once considered one of nature's most useful products. A mineral mined principally in Canada, it consists of tiny fibers that are extremely strong, durable and heat resistant. These properties once seemed to make it ideal for insulation in buildings and ships, in fire-resistant clothing and in friction-bearing surfaces such as brake linings.

During the 1960s, asbestos was commonly sprayed on the ceilings of schoolrooms.

The ban will occur in three stages, which Reilly said are necessary to allow industries to develop substitutes for asbestos. The most far-reaching effect will be on the automobile industry, which must redesign brakes to accommodate substitute materials by the 1994 model year.

Auto manufacturers must find an alternative material for engine gaskets after 1993, and the substance will be banned in cement pipe, shingles and roof coatings in 1996.

The substance ban will not apply to several highly specialized uses—including "unsaturated" resins—and manufacturers can apply for exemptions in special circumstances, EPA officials said.

Reilly stressed that asbestos is most hazardous when disturbed and that "consumers should not attempt the unnecessary replacement of existing asbestos-containing products."

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Alan McMillan,

acting chief of OSHA.

Friction Division

Products couldn't

be reached for comment.

Meanwhile,

OSHA standards

were a

focus of a House

subcommittee hearing

on allegations

that the White

House

budget office

has blocked or

seriously

diluted many

federal regulations.

Some OSHA

officials and other

witnesses told

the House legisla-

tion and national

security subcommittee,

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Operations Committee

unit, that the

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has frequently

used provisions of

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