Daily Environment Report™

Source: Daily Environment Report: All Issues > 2010 > January > 01/20/2010 > News > Toxic Substances: EPA, New York City Agree on Regimen To Address PCB-Laden Caulk in Schools

11 DEN A-8

Toxic Substances

EPA, New York City Agree on Regimen To Address PCB-Laden Caulk in Schools

NEW YORK—The New York City school system will undertake a pilot study with the Environmental Protection Agency to develop a citywide approach to address polychlorinated biphenyls found in caulk in older school buildings, EPA and the city announced Jan. 19.

The study, aimed at assessing and reducing potential PCB exposures at five city schools, is intended to serve as a national model in an EPA effort to reduce PCB exposures from old caulk, the agency said. It is the central feature of an administrative consent order between EPA Region 2 and New York City resolving city school system violations of the Toxic Substances Control Act for having caulk that contains PCBs above allowable levels in some schools, EPA added.

Under the agreement, the city will conduct the study to determine the most effective exposure reduction strategies and will solicit public input on the project, EPA said. The city must then submit a proposed cleanup plan for the pilot locations, as well as a set of best management practices, such as cleaning buildings, improving ventilation, and addressing deteriorating caulk, the agency added.

That stage will be followed by negotiations on a longer-term reduction plan, the city said.

Most PCB uses were banned by Congress in 1976 and PCBs were phased out of industrial use by 1978, but caulk containing PCBs was used for construction and renovation between 1950 and 1978, EPA said. The PCBs made the caulk more flexible, according to the agency.

Buildings from that period may still have PCBs at high levels in caulk around windows and door frames, between masonry columns, and in other masonry building materials, EPA said.

In September 2009, the agency issued new guidance and announced additional research to address PCBs in caulk in older buildings (185 DEN A-11, 9/28/09).

Agreement Complements National Efforts

The agreement with the city, EPA said, complements national efforts by "helping building owners and managers facing serious PCB problems develop practical approaches to reduce exposures and prioritize the removal of PCB caulk."

"The work that the city has agreed to do will go a long way toward helping us better understand the potential risks posed by PCBs in caulk, and our work to reduce the exposure of school children, teachers, and others who work in city public schools," EPA Region 2 Administrator Judith Enck said in a statement.

Noting that the city's 1,600 public schools make it the largest U.S. school system, Enck added: "We believe that the program outlined in this agreement, along with general EPA guidance on managing the issue, will serve as a model for school systems across the country."

In its announcement of the agreement, the city emphasized steps it has already been taking to reduce exposure to PCBs from caulk.

"Today's agreement will build on the effectiveness of our existing program to remove PCB caulking whenever we encounter it during school renovation projects," said Kathleen Grimm, deputy city schools chancellor for infrastructure and portfolio planning.

Safety Protocols

The city School Construction Authority and Education Department have "rigorous testing and safety protocols to properly remove PCB caulk in areas of public schools renovated during capital improvement projects," Grimm said. "While this work has been extensive and continues, there remains much to understand about the possible risks posed by PCB caulk, especially with regard to its potential to affect indoor air."

City Corporation Counsel Michael A. Cardozo said the agreement "demonstrates that complex environmental issues can be resolved through cooperative negotiations and without protracted litigation."

By John Herzfeld

The text of the agreement between the New York City public school system and EPA is available at http://www.epa.gov/region2/CAFONYCPCB_1-19-10.pdf.

More information on the EPA national campaign is available at http://www.epa.gov/pcbsincaulk.

Contact us at http://www.bna.com/contact/index.html or call 1-800-372-1033

ISSN 1521-9402

Copyright © 2010, The Bureau of National Affairs, Inc.. Reproduction or redistribution, in whole or in part, and in any form, without express written permission, is prohibited except as permitted by the BNA Copyright Policy. http://www.bna.com/corp/index.html#V