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FILE LIBBY

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Nader group cites mine in bid to discredit Grace

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HELENA — Ralph Nader's Public Citizen group has cited health risks for workers at the W.R. Grace and Co. vermiculite mine at Libby in an effort to discredit the Grace Commission's federal budget cost-cutting proposals.

The group said in a recently released report that health problems among Libby mine workers help underscore the dangers of the Grace Commission's recommendations for reductions in federal environmental controls.

The Grace Commission, also known as the President's Private Sector Survey on Cost Control, was headed by W.R. Grace chairman Peter Grace.

The commission last year issued 2,478 recommendations it claimed could trim the federal budget by \$424 billion in three years. Among the recommendations were cutbacks in the Environmental Protection

Agency and delegation of many of its duties to the states.

The proposal would lead to "weakened enforcement" of environmental rules, the Public Citizen report said, yet examples such as the Libby mine illustrate "clearly the importance of strong federal regulation and enforcement."

Fred Bona, who handles press relations at W.R. Grace headquarters in New York City, called the report "really old hat."

"It's a bunch of cold mashed potatoes," he said.

Nader's group has tried to discredit Grace before, Bona said, adding that the group attempted to make its report appear to be well-documented. Bona said Grace officials wouldn't comment on specific charges in the report.

Last week, workers at the mine were told of a study by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) that showed previous conditions at the mine increased some employees' risk of

dying from respiratory disease 2½ times over the national average.

The study showed the incidence of lung problems in past and present workers is directly related to levels of contaminants in the air to which workers were exposed.

Vermiculite contains asbestos, which has been linked to lung cancer and other respiratory diseases. Vermiculite is used in such products as insulation, kitty litter and potting soil.

The NIOSH results were similar to those of an earlier study by McGill University of Montreal, Canada.

An author of the McGill study, Corbett McDonald, told the Missoulian last week that working conditions at the mine have improved in recent years and are "frankly pretty good."

He said a worker employed at the plant under current contamination levels for 50 years has a 5.5 percent greater risk of getting lung cancer than does the general population.

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lation, while a person who worked at the plant when conditions were much worse had a 150 percent greater chance of dying from lung cancer.

Public Citizen said the current and former workers it interviewed agreed that conditions at the mine improved after a new mill was installed in 1974, and had improved considerably in the past six to eight years. The group's report quoted two workers as saying the plant was built to comply with federal standards.

The report, whose principal author was Peter Ajemian, also said that a "number" of workers said the company hadn't informed them about serious asbestos health hazards until the late 1970s, or "well after it had first acknowledged the presence of asbestos to the EPA in 1971."

Mine manager William McCaig

said last week that the company began to formally educate its employees of the health risks and how to reduce them in about 1977. He said the company wasn't trying to hide anything, but was like other companies in those days and just didn't make such education efforts.

While everyone seems to agree that conditions have improved at the mine, Public Citizen said there have been incidences when asbestos levels exceeded federal standards of 2 fibers per cubic centimeter. For

example, it said, one sampling from the mine in 1982 showed an asbestos concentration of 9.7 fibers per cubic centimeter.

The Public Citizen report also said that several EPA reports done in the early 1980s indicated that a small amount of asbestos remained in the vermiculite leaving Libby so that exposure to it was possible when the material was processed and expanded and when it was used by consumers.

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