

Originally published in **TRIBUNE-REVIEW**, March 12, 1979

White House aides endangered by asbestos, too

WASHINGTON — When Charles Poole started chugging up those five flights of stairs every morning in the New Executive Office Building—where many White House aides work—he thought it would make him healthier.

But soon he began to worry about the strange-looking, thick, grey material that hung like moss from the stairwell ceilings. A public health specialist by profession, Poole suspected immediately it was asbestos, a hazardous substance known to cause lung cancer and other serious respiratory diseases.

And he was afraid that the stairways of the prestigious government building—which houses, among other agencies the Council on Environmental Quality—were riddled with it.

Poole turned out to be right.

A former employee of the council who now works for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), he recently went back to the building and took a sample. A lab analysis confirmed his worst fears. Not only was the substance asbestos, but its content was 30 times higher than current EPA regulations permit.

Technically, no laws are being violated, because the building was constructed in 1965, several years before EPA passed rules that severely curtailed asbestos use as insulation, and as a fire and noise retardant.

But there is a certain irony that the building's employees—many of whom are charged with monitoring the public environment—are facing potential danger in their own.

"I sure wouldn't go up and down those stairs again," Poole said. "I would advise all those people there to stay away."

"This finding suggests there is a real hazard here," said Nathan Karch, the environmental council's acting senior staff member for toxic substances and environmental health. "It makes all the policy implications of using asbestos all the more real when it's close to home. I'd like to urge the EPA and the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) to start taking a closer look at office buildings—especially this one."

The danger from asbestos comes from inhaling the tiny fibers. If the asbestos is sealed somehow, the danger decreases. In this building—where employees of the office of Management and Budget, the Council on Wage and Price Stability, and the Office of Science and Technology Policy also work—the asbestos is not bonded or sealed in any way.

But officials at EPA and OSHA, who share some of the authority in regulating asbestos, say they have higher priorities than office buildings—although they do acknowledge the likelihood that a widespread problem exists.

"The problem is much bigger than that particular building—I would say the problem is quite extensive," said Steven D. Jellinek, EPA's assistant administrator for toxic substances. "We just don't know how many public buildings around the country have this problem. But we do know that many school buildings and public buildings constructed between 1948 and 1973 were sprayed with it."

EPA is now preparing a set of voluntary guidelines to help school districts identify asbestos problems.

OSHA List Released

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has released a tentative list of chemicals for possible regulation under the mechanism for regulating cancer hazards in the work-place which it proposed in October, 1977.

The list was compiled for OSHA by Clement Associates, Inc. of Washington, D.C., which reviewed and categorized the 2,000 chemicals identified as suspect carcinogens by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. Chemical substances included on the OSHA list appear to meet OSHA's criteria for Category I, II and III substances.

In issuing the list, OSHA's Director of

Health Standards Programs, Grover Wrenn, noted, "I would like to emphasize that the final regulation issued from this rulemaking may contain somewhat different criteria for classifying Category I, II, or III toxic substances as carcinogens." Wrenn also pointed out that OSHA has not yet scientifically examined the list and that continuing review might result in substances being added or deleted from the list.

Wrenn encouraged all participants in the policy proceeding to include in their submissions a list of priorities for regulation of these substances, as well as an explanation of the criteria they would use.