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Asbestos dust called killer

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By STEVE ROTHMAN
Staff Writer

"There is no doubt about it . . . asbestos dust is a killer if it gets into your lungs."

The man who was speaking was James Middleton, business representative for the International Chemical Workers Union, Local 60, in Waukegan.

Some 25 environmental experts, concerned citizens and representatives of the Johns-Manville Company plant in Waukegan sat and listened.

Samuel T. Lawton Jr., Illinois Pollution Control Board member, eyed the wiry union executive with interest.

"There is a long hard road ahead to improving conditions (in the Waukegan plant)," added Middleton, "but we are looking toward the day when we can pull off our respirators and work without them."

Middleton's testimony came at the end of three days of hearings before the IPCB, which is creating regulations to protect the public and workers from asbestos-related ailments.

Hearings also were held in Granite City and the Field Museum in Chicago.

"We read a great deal about emission control standards," said Middleton, "but we seldom come in contact with the people working with the products."

Middleton brought employe problems to the attention of News-Sun reporter Steve Rothman last June.

He provided death certificates on two workers, who died of ailments caused by long exposure to asbestos dust in the plant.

A series of News-Sun articles led to a promise by J-M officials to clean up the four plants it operates in Waukegan and to create a union-management environmental team to work out methods of dust control. It also led to a special asbestos dust hearing in Waukegan.

J-M officials termed the series the work of a "local busybody troublemaker trying to muddy up J-M's good name," according to an IPCB investigator.

But the investigator added the investigation indicated J-M had a great deal more to do even though it was a leader in the field of environmental protection for asbestos workers.

Middleton said workers were exposed to dust when unloading railroad cars of asbestos material and making pipe in the transite pipe division, as well as in its block-making process.

"The company has showed us where it is making improvements in the plant," he said, "but the problem has not been solved.

"Asbestos dust will get into the lungs some way, if it is not controlled," he added, "and we feel the respirator (used by employes) is not good."

Middleton said the union has adopted a wait-and-see attitude to see how far the committee can go in cleaning up the plant."

The danger not only is in the handling of asbestos, said Middleton.

"Workers leave the plant with dust on their clothes," he said. "They carry it into their cars, into the stores where other people buy products and home.

"Their children come in contact with the dust and get it in their lungs, when they play on the couch where their fathers' sit to rest," he added.

Middleton said he felt workers should be provided clothes which would be left in the plant at the end of the day, or some means of cleaning the dust from their clothing before they went home.

Gaddam N. Reddy, an Illinois Environmental Protection Agency environmental engineer, said he felt regulations should stop all commercial activity where asbestos was used

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James Middleton, left, business manager for the International Chemical Workers Union, Local 60, and Benjamin Pout, union president, discuss conditions at the Johns-Manville complex in Waukegan with Charles Wikel, one of the company's plant managers. (Staff photo)

Plant problems

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unless the person in charge complies with regulations.

"We want to stop dust from getting into the atmosphere not just those who violate the regulations," he said.

Reddy said the agency was recommending that mechanical exhaust of dust into the atmosphere be prohibited.

"Any factory, plant or enterprise should have to enclose its asbestos facilities so all exhaust air is filtered," he said.

Reddy said he felt the spraying of asbestos fibers should be regulated so that the fibers are confined to the area being treated.

But he did not feel that all spraying of asbestos fibers should be prevented.

IPCB is proposing that all asbestos spraying be halted.

But Benjamin Foss, president of Local 60, urged the board not to halt use of asbestos spraying.

"Handled properly, asbestos is a good fire protection material," he said, pointing to the disastrous McCormick Place fire of several years ago.

McCormick Place had not been protected from fire by flame resistant materials and all steel girders melted under the intense heat.

Howard Ayer, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health of the U.S. Public Service, said that in-plant testing for dust concentrations can be set up for about $1,100.

He said filters which employes could wear cost about 60-cents a piece.

He said it takes one day to train a man who knows how to use a microscope in testing techniques.

A man of average intelligence can learn the process in one week where he first must learn to handle a microscope.

"Our primary concern is with the workers," he said. "Asbestos is related to lung cancer and we aim to see these people protected because of the danger from long exposure."

Ayer said that protection must come at the "source" of exposure.

Ayers said the concern is not with the dust which you see, "but the dust which you cannot see because it is too small but can make it into your lungs."

Fred Engelking, a Catapillar Tractor Co. research expert, said that the company had made its own test of brake linings and felt the evidence inconclusive to pass regulations covering them.

"Caterpillar. . .questions whether the intent of the . . . regulations is actually accomplished by the proposed ban of asbestos brake linings," he said referring to the 1975 cutoff date for use of asbestos in brake linings.

He said if testing indicates a danger exists, the regulations should be qualified to allow asbestos use in a totally enclosed brake compartment system. This would prevent asbestos particles from getting into the air.

If testing indicates that asbestos brakes are harmful then a reasonable threshhold limit of the danger should be established, he added.

"Place the burden on the manufacturer to design his product to meet reasonable, attainable standards," he said. "Don't just prohibit the use of asbestos in brakes."

But Colin F Harwood, an Illinois Institute of Technology Institute research chemist, said brake linings have asbestos dust in them and that many people have asbestos deposits in their lungs although they don't work with the product.

Harwood, who testified at earlier hearings, told The News-Sun "asbestos spraying" should be stopped.

"Building sites are essentially messy places and are hard to clean up," he said. "Spraying increases the number of airborne particles."

While J-M took no active part in the Waukegan hearings, officials later backed the position of Dr. Fred L. Pundsack, a company vice president who represented the Asbestos Information Association of North America in Chicago.

Pundsack said while the danger to the general public had not been defined. . .

"We believe it is prudent and feasible to establish reasonable emission controls that will protect the public and ensure that hazardous levels of asbestos will not develop in the community air in the future."



Dust dangers

Samuel T. Lawton Jr., IPCB board member, reads over submitted testimony dealing with the dangers of asbestos dust. (Staff photo)

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