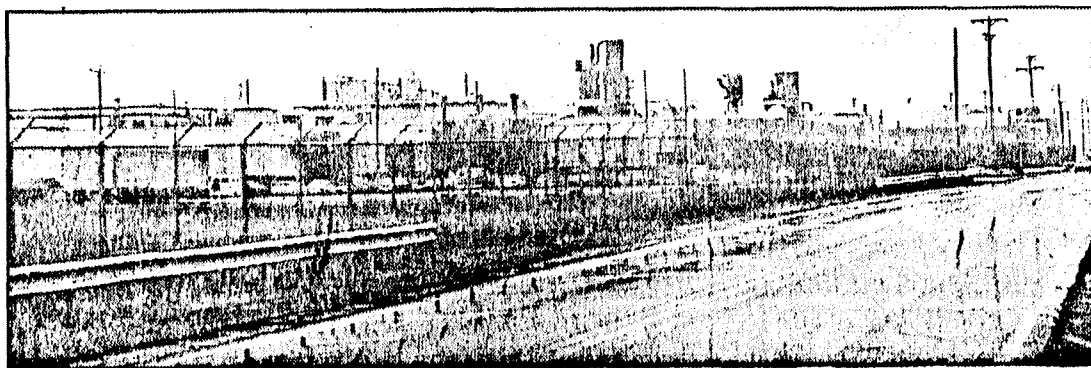




Times Union photo by Tom LaPoint

LONGTIME NEIGHBOR — The Bendix plant is the focus of concern about decades of asbestos emissions and the threat to the health of its Green Island neighbors.

Bendix emissions legal but worrisome

Green Island plant defends against asbestos scare

By Phil Brown
Staff writer

GREEN ISLAND — On a sunny Wednesday, the cheerful signs of the changing season were everywhere: birds singing, children playing baseball, people working in yards.

But spring was not the only thing in the air in Green Island last week.

At the north end of the village, the huge Bendix Friction Materials plant spewed asbestos — invisible fibers that can lodge in the lung and cause cancer — into the sky.

Bendix has been making asbestos brake linings at the corner of Cohoes and Tibbits avenues for 50 years, providing

a steady supply of jobs and taxes to a village of 2,700 people. In recent weeks, however, the firm has had to defend itself against accusations it has been poisoning the air.

Bendix came under attack as it took steps to cut its asbestos emissions from 6,800 to 5,300 pounds a year. Even with the reductions, the plant will remain the state's largest asbestos polluter.

Environmental activists want the emissions stopped or drastically curtailed, but the state Department of Environmental Conservation says the plant is complying with the law.

See BENDIX / A-10

A-10 SUNDAY TIMES UNION • Albany, N.Y., Sunday, April 16, 1989

BENDIX

Continued from A-1

The controversy has raised several questions without yielding the answers:

- How much asbestos has Bendix emitted over the decades? Neither state nor company officials could say. In recent years, however, it has emitted up to 9,000 pounds annually, according to a company spokesman.

- Where does the asbestos go? EnCon has not tried to find out. Agency officials question whether it would be possible to distinguish the Bendix asbestos from that already in the air.

- Have the emissions harmed people living near the plant? There has been no health study to determine this.

Bendix contends its emissions are safe. As evidence, it cites two of its studies of workers and a state report on Green Island cancer statistics.

"The information we have on hand indicates that there aren't any problems," said Craig Larson, the plant's manager for health, safety and environmental affairs.

State health officials are not so sure. Two physicians who work in environmental medicine said the reports cited by Bendix are at best inconclusive — and contain some troubling statistics.

"There is no question whatsoever that the release of asbestos into the air of the village is bad," said Dr. Philip Landrigan, chairman of the state Asbestos Advisory Board, which advises state agencies. "Asbestos is a

carcinogen. It's almost axiomatic that there is no such thing as a safe level of exposure."

Asbestos is a mineral fiber whose strength and fire-resistant properties make it ideal for brakes. Since the 19th century, asbestos has been used in hundreds of products — everything from ceiling tiles to theater curtains and Santa Claus beards.

As early as the 1930s, when Bendix switched to asbestos, there were indications that the fibers might cause lung cancer. It wasn't until 1971, however, that the federal government set a national standard for asbestos exposure in the workplace.

Asbestos has been linked to two other fatal diseases: asbestosis, a scarring of lung tissue, and mesothe-

lioma, a cancer of the membrane surrounding the chest and abdomen.

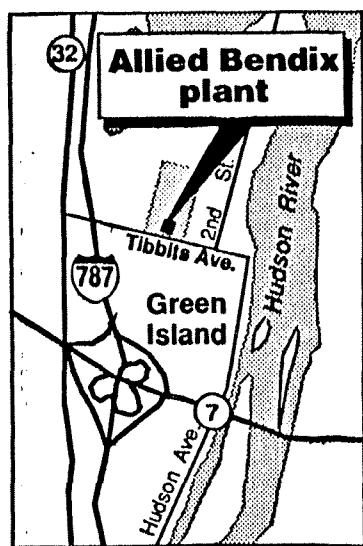
All three diseases can take 20 years or longer to develop.

So far, nearly all medical data on asbestos have come from studies of workers. Health officials, therefore, can only speculate on the effect of outdoor emissions, such as those in Green Island.

Landrigan strongly doubts that plant emissions can cause asbestosis, which, he said, follows prolonged and extensive exposure.

Cancer is another matter. It's unknown how much asbestos must be inhaled to trigger the disease.

Some environmentalists argue that just a single fiber can cause cancer, but Landrigan dismissed this as mere-



Times Union map

ly a theoretical possibility.

The evidence of harm in Green Island is scanty and muddy.

In 1983, the state Health Department gathered information on all cancer cases in the village from 1976 to 1980. It recorded 14 cases of lung cancer — six more than would be expected. For men alone, the study recorded 10 lung-cancer cases — four more than normal.

The report said the excess lung cancers could be attributed to chance and were statistically insignificant.

Despite the report's conclusion, Bendix doesn't get a clean bill of health, according to Dr. James Melius, director of the department's Division of Occupational Health and Environmental Epidemiology.

Melius said the study was simply too small to draw any safe conclusions. If the lung-cancer trend continues in updates of the study, he said, that would be significant.

In fact, Melius said, the 10 cases among men come "pretty close to being significant." Asked how many cases would have been statistically meaningful, he replied: "I'd say 12 to 15, in that range."

The study said some of the lung-cancer victims might have been exposed to carcinogens at their jobs. It also pointed out that most, if not all, of the people who died of lung cancer smoked cigarettes. Melius, however, said smokers face an especially great danger from asbestos. Smoking and breathing asbestos, he said, combine to multiply, by many times over, the risk of getting cancer.

The Bendix plant sits on 25 acres, just across the street from blocks of homes. Nearby are playgrounds and the village's public school.

Neighborhood residents said last week that they gave little thought to the asbestos emissions until newspaper stories began appearing two months ago. Most said they're still not greatly worried. In fact, several people complained instead about the plant's odors.

"It doesn't bother me at all," Barbara Demente of 62 West St. said of the asbestos. "Why? We all gotta die of something, I guess. I haven't seen a lot of premature cancers in Green Island."

The powers-that-be in the village regard Bendix as nothing but a good neighbor — one that employs 500 people and pays lots of taxes.

Former Mayor John McNulty, whose family has dominated village politics for most of this century, dismissed the asbestos scare: "I've lived here for 67 years, and I'm as healthy as a horse."

Larson said he expects the emissions to curtail in the 1990s as automakers switch to non-asbestos brakes. The federal government, he said, is thinking about banning asbestos brakes.

Environmental activists want action now. At the very least, they say, they want EnCon to require the company to prepare an environmental impact statement. A staffer's recommendation for such a study was overruled.

"I just don't think they're taking this very seriously. I think EnCon is blowing it in a big way," said Judi Enck, who represents Rensselaer County Environmental Action and Hudson River Sloop Clearwater.

EnCon Regional Director Jane Magee noted that neither federal nor state law limits the amount of asbestos a company can discharge. Rather, federal law requires a plant to use the best technology available to control the emissions.

Since Bendix is complying with the law, Magee said, she expects to issue the modified air permits within a few weeks. She added, however, that the company probably will be required to measure and characterize its asbestos emissions.

That does not satisfy Enck or others who pushed for the environmental impact statement, a broad study that tries to gauge a project's effect on people and nature.

"You can't say, 'Deny the permit and shut the plant down.' That wouldn't be fair," said Michael Doyle, director of the Rensselaer County Environmental Management Council. "But I think they should do a full study to determine the health effects."