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Proposed Ban of Asbestos in Drywall Patching Compounds

CPSC Hearings on Proposed Ban of Asbestos in Drywall Patching Compounds, Aug. 15, 1977

An official copy of the transcript of hearings has arrived from the Consumer Product Safety Commission.

By the time of this hearing, U.S. Gypsum and Bondex Int'l had reformulated their products to no longer include asbestos. USG's representative said the major manufacturers had stopped using asbestos.

Union Carbide's Harrison Rhodes, speaking for his company and the Asbestos Information Association (trade assn. of the asbestos industry), opposed the proposed ban. He provided some interesting technical information on the functions of asbestos in the products (92-93). Also, data were generated by Rhodes indicating lower levels of asbestos exposure than those published by the Mt. Sinai researchers in 1975 (p. 70). Rhodes' risk estimates for consumer asbestos exposure were directed to show that the risk to a consumer using such products for a few hours was insignificant. Not mentioned was the risk to workers who regularly used the products; their protection was not the responsibility of CPSC (though they ultimately were protected, because CPSC could not assure that any channels of sale of the products would not be accessible to consumers). Rhodes would later send an 11th hour letter to Commissioner Pittle on Dec. 14, 1977, the day before the ban was published in the Federal Register -- again giving the same ("risk equal to being struck by lightning") estimates of the risk these products posed to casual consumers.

It strikes me as callous and contrived, for Carbide to fight so hard for this market for a few tons of asbestos, when the drywall compound industry leaders had already abandoned asbestos, in at least some cases for such harmless substitutes as calcium carbonate (p. 40). It is also curious that Carbide was able to generate so much lower exposure levels that Rohl et al., and I for one would like to know how Rhodes and the workers who actually did the monitored job would respond to questions about whether anything was done that would tend to reduce the dustiness of the job. Carbide and the other companies were clearly worried that CPSC would order a recall of the banned products, at the expense of the patching product manufacturers and their asbestos suppliers. The vote of the Commissioners was 3-2 against requiring the recall, I forget exactly when that was decided.

Additional certified official material from CPSC is expected, including Rhodes' 12-14-77 letter, in the next few weeks.