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Duluth Stoically Awaits Tests for Cancer Risk in Its Water

By WILLIAM E. FARRELL
Special to The New York Times

DULUTH, Minn., June 23—The 100,600 residents of this port on Lake Superior, who have prided themselves on the purity of their drinking water, are stoically awaiting the results of scientific tests to determine whether asbestos fibers detected in the water present a risk of cancer.

Last week, the United States Environmental Protection Agency released a report disclosing that "high concentrations" of asbestos fibers, which have been linked to lung cancer, had been found in Lake Superior. The lake is the source for drinking water for Duluth and the neighboring communities of Silver Bay, Beaver Bay and Two Harbors.

The Federal agency said there was "no conclusive evidence" to show that the lake water was unfit for consumption but that "prudence dictates that an alternate source of drinking water be found for very young children."

Juice and Soft Drinks

As a result, parents have been buying bottled spring water, or using well water, or buying quantities of canned juice and soft drinks.

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, the state's environmental arm, attributes the presence of the microscopic asbestos fibers to the discharge of taconite tailings into the lake by the Reserve Mining Company of Silver Bay. The tailings are grains of ore from which magnetic particles of iron have been extracted.

The company has been embroiled with the Federal Government and with environmentalists for several years because of its discharges into the lake. It dumps 67,000 tons of tailings a day into Lake Superior, the largest and thought to be the purest fresh water lake in the world.

Dr. Charles Carson, a geologist who is deputy director of the state's environmental agency, says there is no question about the presence of asbestos fibers in the water.

In a statement denying the existence of any health hazard, Edward Schmid, assistant to the president of Reserve Mining, said:

"It is unfortunate that this unfounded charge has been made public without testing its validity.

"We know of no reason to believe there is any more substance to this charge than there was to similar claims involving arsenic and mercury in Reserve's tailings which created mild sensations before they were disproved and abandoned. We know of no evidence and no indication to support the charge that there is any present or future hazard to drinking water supplies due to tailings."

Getting Tissue Samples

Dr. Carson, in an interview, responded, "Reserve's attitude is that it's just another darn trick. There are plenty of asbestos-type fibers in the water and the air. The question that remains is—is this as serious as Selikoff thinks it is. If it is, it's no paper tiger."

Dr. Carson was referring to Dr. Irving J. Selikoff, the head of the Environmental Sciences Laboratory at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City, an international expert on environmentally caused cancern. Dr. Selikoff came to Duluth on Monday night with Dr. E. Cuyler Hammond, biostatician for the American Cancer Society. Their mission is to obtain tissue samples of deceased Duluth residents, taken during autopsies, to compare them with those of asbestos workers and of persons with no known exposure to the mineral.

In a telephone interview from his New Jersey home, Dr. Selikoff said that he had a dozen persons working 12-hour shifts around the clock at Mount Sinai analyzing the tissue samples and that he hoped to have some findings within weeks.

Dr. Selikoff and other researchers have previously found that asbestos workers had high death rates from cancer of the lung, the stomach and the colon.

In addition, the two New York doctors are analyzing data about smoking habits of Duluth residents that were compiled since 1959 by the American Cancer Society.

While there is obvious concern among residents, their basic attitude, as summed up by one elderly taxi driver, is, "Let's wait and see what this doctor comes up with."

Robert E. Ball, an insurance underwriter, said, "All my friends have been drinking it for 20 years and they say 'What am I going to do without water?' A switch to bottle water wouldn't do much good now."

Fountains Shut Off

But Mrs. Orval Chatfield, a housewife, took a harsher view, saying, "This is bad for the tourists, and to think it's polluting what was once the freshest body of water. That Reserve plant — something should be done."

At the Copeland Community Center, where 60 low-income youngsters are enrolled in day-care programs run by the county welfare department, James Anderson said that the water fountains had been shut off and that the children were drinking water from another county or apple juice.

In response to pleas by area Congressmen, the White House has appointed Russell E. Train, chairman of the Federal Council on Environmental Quality, to coordinate all Federal efforts to resolve the water crisis. Several teams came here to study the water supplies and to seek alternative water supplies for the area.

In addition, the Army Corps of Engineers began to experiment with "erdlators" — devices that had been used to purify water for troops in Vietnam — to see if they were sophisticated enough to delete the tiny asbestos fibers from the lake waters.

Meantime, the waiting goes on.

Mayor Ben Boo, lauding his constituents' attitude to date, siad, "There's no reason to be confident. Let's get some more facts. I think the public has accepted that."

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