

E.P.A. Proposes Plan to Curb Asbestos

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 23 — The Environmental Protection Agency today proposed a long-range program to protect the public from what it called "the serious health threat of asbestos."

Five widely used asbestos products would be banned as soon as the rule setting up the program went into effect. All other mining, processing, manufacturing and importing of asbestos would be gradually eliminated over 10 years.

The new rule would not affect asbestos products already in use. There would be no requirement that asbestos be removed from private or public buildings or vehicles.

Products to Be Labeled

A number of asbestos products to which there is high public exposure, particularly brake linings, would not be immediately banned because there is not yet an acceptable substitute, agency officials said.

The proposed rule would require the labeling of all asbestos products not

immediately banned, to alert users to the dangers involved.

But agency officials noted that the rule would permit exemptions in the phasing-out process when inexpensive substitutes could not be found. In such cases, they said asbestos use could conceivably be continued beyond the 10-year period.

The proposed rule would immediately bar the use of asbestos roofing felts, asbestos flooring felts, vinyl asbestos floor tile, asbestos cement pipe and fittings, and asbestos clothing. The agency said that the five products represented one-third to one-half of all asbestos production in the United States, which totaled 240,000 metric tons in 1984, down from a high of 875,000 tons in 1973.

The proposal will now be subject to a 90-day comment period before publication of a final rule banning asbestos. It will be at least a year before the rule is put into effect.

The environmental agency first proposed regulating asbestos in 1979.

Regulations like those in the program proposed today were drafted two years ago. Promulgation of the regulations were delayed, however, in large part because of a variety of objections by the White House Office of Management and Budget.

Lee M. Thomas, Administrator of the agency, said at a news conference today that the issues raised by the budget office had been resolved by the new proposal.

Because of its heat and friction resistance and insulating properties, asbestos has long been widely used as a building material and in a broad range of industrial and consumer products. While information about the health risks of asbestos emerged as early as 50 years ago, industry hid such information from the public, Government lawyers and others have charged.

By the 1970's the dangers became well-documented. Workers and others exposed to airborne asbestos fibers developed lung cancer, an incurable form of cancer known as mesothelioma, asbestosis and other lung diseases and illness. Thousands of lawsuits have been brought against asbestos manufacturers and the Government.

Benefits Are Foreseen

The E.P.A. currently estimates there are from 3,300 to 12,000 deaths each year from exposure to asbestos. Mr. Thomas said that if the proposal were adopted, it would avoid 1,900 of these deaths between now and the end of the century.

The new program would prevent only some of the expected cancer deaths for several reasons. One is that asbestos products will continue to be used. Another is that millions of Americans continue to be exposed to asbestos already in buildings. Finally, because it can take decades for people exposed to asbestos to grow ill, many of those exposed in the past would not benefit from the new protections.

The program's total cost to the public, chiefly from higher prices for asbestos substitutes, would be about \$2 billion, which would come to about \$10 for every American over the next 15 years, agency officials said.

But Bob Pigg, president of the Asbestos Information Association/North America, an industry group, said that "the ultimate impact of the rule would be the demise of the U.S. asbestos industry," which now numbers some 275 companies.

Proposal Termed Unwarranted

"We think the E.P.A. proposal is totally unwarranted and completely inconsistent with the international consensus which favors control of asbestos as opposed to banning of asbestos," Mr. Pigg said.

Dr. Irving J. Selikoff, a leading authority on the health risks of asbestos, said that the E.P.A. rules represented a "very cautious approach" that focused on "the potential exposure of people and prevention of cancer while at the same time trying to meet economic and industrial requirements."

He said, however, that the proposal does not deal with "major new exposures going on," largely in the construction industry, to workers exposed to the 30 million tons of asbestos applied over the last 80 years.

Representative James J. Florio, Democrat of New Jersey, who is an activist on toxics issues, said "I am pleased something is happening" but added, "the substance of the rule leaves something to be desired." He said he planned to introduce legislation soon requiring that standards be set to protect children and staff exposed to asbestos in schools.

The E.P.A. currently requires only that schools be inspected for asbestos dangers and that the results be reported to parent-teacher associations.