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Open-Air Spraying of Asbestos Materials Would Be Banned by New EPA Standards

By a WALL STREET JOURNAL Staff Reporter

WASHINGTON -- Open-air spraying of asbestos fireproofing and insulation would be prohibited under new air-emission standards proposed by the Environmental Protection Agency.

The clean-air standards, which cover beryllium and mercury as well as asbestos, also would:

--Require industry to use filters to clean any gases produced in the mining, milling and manufacturing of asbestos-containing materials and to eliminate visible emissions from certain sources related to their operations.

--Set beryllium-emission ceilings for extraction plants, machine shops, foundries, ceramic plants, propellant plants and incinerators that are designed to dispose of toxic substances. These ceilings would limit emissions of the poisonous metal to a maximum of 10 grams per 24-hour day, or to the point that beryllium concentrations won't exceed an average 0.01 microgram per cubic meter of air for 30 days.

-- Require rocket-motor test facilities to keep concentrations of beryllium in the surrounding atmosphere within a ceiling of 75 microgram minutes per cubic meter of air accumulated during any two consecutive weeks. (A microgram minute is derived by dividing the weight of the material collected by the flow rate expressed in cubic meters of air per minute.) The rule provides that the sampling must be done in not less than 10 minutes and not more than 60 minutes. An EPA official explained that the agency would require a network of sampling devices set to collect for varying periods of time within this range.

--Require mercury-cell chlor-alkali plants, which produce chlorine and alkali caustic, and primary mercury mines to limit emissions to a maximum of five pounds of mercury over a 24-hour period.

The inhalation of asbestos fibers has been linked to a number of human diseases including bronchial cancer. Beryllium in high concentrations can cause pneumonia-like diseases, while mercury poisoning disables the nervous system.

Costs of Compliance Assessed

The greatest economic impact from the proposed standards would be felt by the nine asbestos mills processing domestic ores. The EPA estimated that their cost of complying will range up to 6.7% of the average 1969 selling price of a ton of domestically produced asbestos. The average figure for all the mills, however, only would amount to 0.9%, the agency said.

Producers of asbestos products, including floor tile, reinforced friction materials, paper and textiles, face an "annualized cost" equal to 0.3% of the "output product value," according to the EPA. This would result in an average product price increase of 0.3%, with the most significant being 2.6% for asbestos paper products, the agency said.

The ban on sprayed asbestos would affect only about 0.5% of annual domestic consumption. The EPA said that increased costs for substitute materials will range up to 15%, but that new spraying equipment and extensive retraining of workers won't be needed. Additional costs aren't anticipated for beryllium users, but the mercury-cell chlor-alkali plants will have to spend from 0.5% to 0.9% of annual total products' worth. The figure for mines will be 2.5% to 3.5%, the agency estimated.

At a briefing on the proposal, Dale M. Slaughter, chief of the EPA's hazardous pollutants branch, said the agency has been advised by industry that the additional costs mean the end of mercury mining in the U.S. However, Mr. Slaughter argued that depressed mercury prices, not environmental costs, would be the real cause of such a development. At present, the industry, located in California, Nevada and Utah, consists of two large mines with fewer than 200 workers altogether, plus 30 to 40 one-man and two-man mines. In 1969, when mercury prices were triple current levels, 109 mercury mines were operating, he noted.

The asbestos-spraying ban would be tempered by the provision that spraying may be done indoors "under conditions where the air that would be released to the atmosphere can be cleaned."

Beryllium users also would have the choice of complying with the 24-hour-day maximum or the ceiling average over a 30-day period.

Approximately 300 machine shops, ceramics plants, propellant plants, extraction plants and foundries could cause beryllium emissions. But because the light metal's extreme toxicity long has been recognized, "the major portion of the industry already has the emission controls needed to comply with the proposed standards," the agency said. For this reason, and because beryllium trapped in air filtration devices has reprocessing value, it said the standards "are expected to have little impact on the industry."

The EPA said it will announce public hearings on the proposals within 30 days and also is allowing 90 days for written comments.

Agency Looks to Further Limitations

Earlier this year, the EPA made final the maximum atmospheric levels of six major pollutants, including particulates sulphur dioxide and carbon monoxide, that will be permitted under federal-state control plans due to take effect in mid-1975.

In addition, the agency is authorized by the Clean Air Act of 1970 to establish specific source emission limits for toxic substances. The proposals announced Friday represent the first response to this mandate. But the agency now is looking into the possible need for similar emission limits on air-borne cadmium, vanadium, manganese and arsenic, Dr. Vaun A. Newell, EPA health effects director, told the briefing.

One major source of air-borne asbestos, motor-vehicle brake linings, isn't covered by the proposed standards. However, control of brake emissions is "being assessed," EPA officials said.

Sources of mercury in the air also not covered by the proposed standards are fossil fuels, notably coal. Dr. Newell explained that because high stacks and even higher-rising smoke plumes distribute emissions from such sources quite widely, the EPA believes there's "little chance" of them exceeding the ceilings.

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