

Lung cancer survey rated inconclusive

Green Island asbestos check

By Phil Brown

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GREEN ISLAND — Village residents contracted lung cancer more often than expected over an 11-year period, but the excess in cases was not statistically significant, according to a state study.

The state Department of Health conducted the study in response to concerns about the Bendix Friction Materials plant, which emits thousands of pounds of asbestos each year. Asbestos fibers can cause lung cancer.

"Based on the analysis we did here, we don't feel anything unusual's going on," Martin Mahoney, director of the department's Cancer Surveillance Program, said Friday.

Another Health Department official warned, however, that the study is too limited to dismiss the risk to villagers.

"It provides some reassurance, but it doesn't prove that there's no problem," said James Melius, head of the Division of Occupational Health and Environmental Epidemiology.

For example, he said, if the plant caused a few extra cases of lung cancer, the study would not reveal that.

The survey found 29 village residents contracted lung cancer between 1976 and 1986. Although that's seven more cases than normal, Mahoney said the excess is small enough that it could have been caused by chance.

Mahoney, who holds a doctorate in epidemiology, said "at least several more cases of lung cancer" would have been necessary to add up to a statistically significant finding.

The study did conclude that three men probably contracted lung cancer from exposure to asbestos on the job, but Mahoney would not say where they worked.

Bendix studies have found that the rate of lung-cancer deaths among its employees is normal.

A Bendix spokesman said the Health Department survey — an update of an earlier four-year study — backs up the company's position that the emissions are safe.

Bendix estimates it discharged 7,400 pounds of asbestos into the air last year and 9,000 pounds the previous year. The plant plans to phase out its asbestos emissions over the next four years.

Last week, the state Department of Environmental Conservation issued Bendix permits to continue discharging asbestos, according to Craig Larson, the plant's manager for health, safety and environmental affairs. He said Bendix agreed to conduct tests to determine the type and amount of asbestos fibers coming from stacks.

Melius, who is a physician, said the data from the stack tests will help the state determine whether the emissions are dangerous.

"We'll have a much better sense of whether there is a problem or there has been a problem and what the health risk is," he said.

Bendix, located across the street from residential neighborhoods, has been discharging asbestos since the 1930s.

Last week, a report by the National Wildlife Federation ranked the brake-lining plant No. 327 among the nation's top polluters. However, most of the Bendix waste was in the form of asbestos pellets — nearly four million pounds worth — that went to commercial landfills.

Asbestos is dangerous only if inhaled. Some researchers suggest the fibers might also cause cancer of the larynx and gastrointestinal tract, but Mahoney said the survey did not find an abnormal incidence of these types of cancers.

There were 15 cancers of stomach, liver or pancreas — five more than expected — but the excess was deemed statistically meaningless.