



Environmental News

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EPA PROPOSES TO PHASE OUT ASBESTOS USE

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency today proposed to ban the manufacture, importing, and processing of asbestos in certain consumer products, and to phase out its use in other products; any product that is not banned would be labeled as containing asbestos.

"Today's action is a major new step toward eliminating any public exposure to asbestos," said EPA Administrator Lee Thomas. "It is another in a long series of actions by EPA to reduce the risks from this well-documented cause of cancer in our society."

The human health risks of asbestos are serious and well-documented. Asbestos is a known human carcinogen that causes lung cancer and mesothelioma (a cancer of the chest and abdominal lining), and is also linked to other cancers.

EPA analyses show that the elimination of asbestos will have minimal economic impact, due to the widespread availability of substitutes for those asbestos products being banned. About 240,000 metric tons of asbestos were used domestically in 1984.

Acting under authority of the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA), EPA plans to immediately prohibit asbestos in five of the products in which it is used most: roofing felts, flooring felts (and felt-backed sheet flooring), vinyl-asbestos floor tile, asbestos cement pipe and fittings, and clothing. In addition, all remaining domestic mining and importation of asbestos would be phased out over a ten-year period. The ten-year phaseout affecting other products would be

EPA has broken the economic costs of this proposed rule down into two categories: (1) costs to consumers, and (2) cost to producers. The costs represent the total value of losses incurred over the 15-year period from 1985 to 2000.

Consumer losses would result from increases in costs incurred for asbestos products. Total consumer losses are estimated at \$1.8 billion; however, spread across the population this would average less than ten dollars per consumer over 15 years. This proposal would not cause dramatic increases in typical consumer products.

Total producer costs of about \$210 million would result when they can no longer use some of the equipment used to produce asbestos products. Much of this equipment, however, can be readily converted to the production of other products.

The total cost then of meeting this rule will be about \$2 billion, but when spread over the total population over the next 15 years the impact on most persons will be small.

"EPA has weighed the health risks from continued use of asbestos against the cost of the proposed rule, and concluded that the avoidance of about 1,900 cancer cases and many other incidents of asbestos-related disease substantially outweigh the economic effects," said Thomas.

In the 1970s, EPA banned the use of sprayed-on asbestos and asbestos-containing pipe lagging (a type of wrapping) under the Clean Air Act, and since then has taken steps to reduce risks from asbestos already in place in buildings. It has issued an air standard to reduce emissions from asbestos removal and renovation projects in buildings; required inspection of schools for asbestos-containing friable materials and notification of parents if any is found; and established an extensive technical assistance program, which provides guidance to public and private building owners on the identification and safe removal of asbestos. EPA has also proposed an immediately effective regulation to protect states and local public employees who take part in asbestos abatement activities.

For further information, contact Edward A. Klein, Director, Office of TSCA Assistance (TS-799), Office of Toxic Substances, Environmental Protection Agency, Rm. E543, 401 M Street, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20460. Phone toll free: (800-424-9065), in Washington, D.C.: (544-1404), outside the USA: (Operator 202-544-1404).

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