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The asbestos balancing act

Balancing risk and reward, safety and cost — we do it everyday. We weigh the risk of a raft ride on the Arkansas against the thrill of shooting the rapids. We compare the risk of driving with the benefits of mobility. We measure the risk of being shot with the cost and inconvenience of wearing a bulletproof vest.

Government regulators attempt the same act. Sometimes they find a proper balance. Other times they falter.

Consider asbestos. For decades, it was looked upon as something of a miracle substance. Lightweight, strong and fire-resistant, asbestos was used by the millions of tons in construction and industry. Only in the last two decades have tests revealed its darker side — an ability to cause lung cancer.

In response to this health risk, the federal government has moved to effectively ban it from the marketplace by the turn of the century. Last week, the Environmental Protection Agency announced a plan to gradually phase out the use of asbestos. During the final phase of the ban, the EPA plans to prohibit 94 percent of asbestos use.

Cancer has become one of the most frightening words in our language, and with good cause, but the EPA's sweeping and costly program to ban a widely used product from the marketplace appears out of proportion to the actual risk.

According to the EPA's own estimates, the cost to consumers of shifting to asbestos substitutes during the next 13 years will be \$460 million. In that same time, the shift will save about 200 people

from death by cancer. That's a high price to pay to save relatively few lives.

In moral terms, it is true that a dollar value cannot be assigned to a human life. But we nonetheless assign just such a price in our daily economic life. For example, we could tack on an extra \$10,000 to the cost of every new car sold in America to make them safer than they are now. The \$10,000 per car would undoubtedly save some lives, but at what cost?

Banning asbestos would cost more than just an abstract number. It will have a severe financial impact on many private enterprises and on taxpayers. The very survival of some non-profit operations — parochial schools, for example — could be in jeopardy because of the high cost of asbestos removal.

Then there is the more-difficult-to-measure cost of reduced performance from asbestos substitutes. We wonder if anyone at EPA has calculated how many people might die in the next 13 years because of fires that would have been checked had asbestos been present in the walls of a building.

This is not to say some change in asbestos use isn't needed. Perhaps there is another substance out there that can match its performance at an economical cost without the health risk. The sooner industry develops it, the better. But until that day, we should seek a common-sense balance that will protect health without imposing costs out of proportion to the risk.

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