

EPA revises asbestos removal guide

By Michael J. Bennett
News Special Writer

WASHINGTON — The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is sending school administrators a new guidance book that sharply reduces its emphasis on removing asbestos from school buildings.

"The presence of asbestos in a building does not mean that the health of building occupants is endangered," says a final draft of the revised publication, which goes into the mail this week. "If asbestos-containing material remains in good condition and is unlikely to be disturbed, exposure will be negligible."

The federal agency now discourages routine removal and urges educators "to ensure the abatement activity itself does not create a hazard."

"The concept is the same, it's just more clearly stated."

— SUSAN VOGT
EPA asbestos task force member

Many school boards have interpreted the first version of the 200-page book, circulated since 1983, as recommending prompt removal of asbestos from classroom buildings. The mineral has been used widely for insulation, fireproofing and sound-reduction. Inhalation of its microscopic fibers is linked to lung cancer and other long-term diseases.

A 1982 EPA RULE, enforced with fines, requires all schools to inspect for asbestos. "The agency has determined that exposure to asbestos in school buildings poses a significant hazard to public health," the rule says. It doesn't require removal of any material, but community concern often has led to that costly remedy.

The agency wants to make clear that "there's no urgency" to rip out intact asbestos, explained Susan Vogt of the EPA asbestos task force.

Its new guidance book was written at the insistence of the House Appropriations Committee as a condition for release of \$50 million in federal funds to help schools with asbestos

problems. Three Michigan districts will share \$900,000 of that aid, it was announced Thursday.

Although EPA's revised language appears to contrast with its original advice, Ms. Vogt insisted: "The concept is the same, it's just more clearly stated."

The free publication will be mailed first to the 341 school systems getting federal grants and loans. Others will start receiving it next month.

The House committee insisted on a revised book because many prominent scientists complained that the EPA had vastly overstated potential asbestos dangers and was encouraging a remedy that could make the problem worse. The controversy was detailed in a Detroit News series in March.

THE NEW EDITION of the EPA book states: "Asbestos is an extremely emotional issue. The importance of a well-planned communication program cannot be overemphasized."

The guidance material no longer states, as the original version did, that "EPA and the scientific community believe that any level of exposure to asbestos involves some health risk, although the exact degree of risk cannot be reliably estimated."

Both editions note that forecasts of potential health effects among building occupants have been drawn from disease levels among workers exposed to very high levels of the mineral. The new edition still contains these sentences:

"Prevalent levels of airborne asbestos inside buildings may be 10 to 100 times higher than outdoor levels. However, these indoor levels are typically 10,000 to 100,000 times lower than levels in asbestos industry workplaces where asbestos-related diseases have been well-documented."

But the new book omits a third sentence that said: "When asbestos-containing materials are damaged, peak levels inside buildings may approach historic workplace levels."

Instead, the book acknowledges that removal itself can create such "peak levels" and dangers. It recommends: "The only time abatement (primarily removal) should be considered is when it becomes necessary as part of building renovation or maintenance."

The 1983 edition said schools should adopt "an effective strategy to correct asbestos exposure problems," with the emphasis on removal as the "only permanent solution." The 1985 rewrite proposes that school boards first ask:

"Is abatement necessary? When should abatement be done? What abatement method should be used?"

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