

Ban ordered on most uses of asbestos

News wire services

WASHINGTON — The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Thursday ordered a ban on most remaining uses of cancer-causing asbestos, forbidding its use in hundreds of products from automobile brake parts to water pipes.

The prohibition will be phased in over the next seven years and apply only to new products. Asbestos-containing products already in use — and not affected by previous restrictions — are not included because, in some cases, replacement might be more hazardous than a gradual phase-out, officials said.

The action will end the use of asbestos by 1996 in all but a handful of commercial products — guided missile liners, acetylene cylinders and some sealing tapes, for example — for which no adequate substitute has been found and where concerns about health risks are minimal, the agency said.

EPA ADMINISTRATOR William Reilly, calling asbestos a "potent human carcinogen," said widespread use of the material in industry and construction has created "a legacy of death."

The ban, sought by environmental activists for more than a decade, will eventually forbid manufacture, importation and distribution of about 94 percent of asbestos products used in the United States. It will cost industry and consumers about \$460 million over 13 years, Reilly said.

Under the regulation, use of asbestos in some products, including roofing material, pipe wrap and sheet products, will be banned next year; its use by automakers in car and small truck brake pads and linings, clutches and automatic transmission components will be prohibited beginning in 1993 for the 1994 model year; its use in auto replacement parts, cement water distribution pipes, roof shingles and a variety of other applications will be ended in 1996.

THE ASBESTOS BAN came as no surprise to the auto industry, which has been working for years to find substitutes and to eliminate the use of asbestos in braking systems and clutch pads.

"Actually we supported the ban. We favored a planned phase-out," said Allied Signal Automotive spokesman John Coxeter. Allied's Bendix Division is the nation's largest supplier of braking systems and products with about one-third of the market. Bendix is also the nation's No. 1 supplier of asbestos-free brake products, Coxeter said.

Most brake products sold for new cars are now asbestos-free, and the

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major use of asbestos comes in supply of replacement brake products for older vehicles, he said.

COXETER SAID Bendix is using and researching a number of asbestos substitutes including metallic fibers and a variety of synthetic compounds.

"The bottom line is we're working as fast as we can to get there," Dunn said.

General Motors Corp. spokeswoman Toni Simonetti said metallic fibers are now used by GM as a substitute for asbestos in front disc brakes and the company is working on replacing the use of asbestos in rear brake drums. So far, more a quarter of new GM cars and half its light trucks have asbestos-free rear braking systems, she said. Without providing exact figures, she said the substitute material is "relatively more expensive."

Ben Dunn, engineering and design public relations manager for Chrysler, said the company has proceeded cautiously because brakes are one of the most critical systems on a vehicle and consumer expectations remain high.

REPLACING ASBESTOS is difficult because substitute materials can't be used across the board as manufacturers have been able to do with asbestos.

Asbestos, which has seemed ideal for insulation and friction-product uses because of its strength and resistance to heat, becomes hazardous when it crumbles and its fibers are inhaled. Exposure to asbestos can cause lung cancer and a variety of other diseases.

The EPA estimates 3,000 to 12,000 Americans die of asbestos-related cancer each year. But the new ban is expected to save only 200 lives over 13 years because most asbestos exposure comes from material already in buildings and equipment, Reilly said.

THE EPA ACTION does not affect continuing efforts to rid buildings, including schools, of loosely formed asbestos insulation and spray-on asbestos, both of which have been banned from production since 1978.

Asbestos is part of the nation's water system. There are more than 400,000 miles of concrete-asbestos pipe carrying drinking water to thousands of communities. The EPA said that while there is concern about health risks in the production and replacement of such pipes, there is no risk of contamination of drinking water.

Reilly urged against consumers attempting to dig up asbestos-cement water pipes or to replace asbestos brake parts.

"Disturbing asbestos brakes, shingles, or siding already in place where there is no health or safety reason to do so can cause a much greater health hazard than leaving them in place," said Reilly.

THURSDAY'S ACTION was praised by environmentalists.

"This is a new approach — pollution prevention," said Jacqueline Warren, an attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Ellen Silbergeld, a toxicologist with the Environmental Defense Fund, called the action "long past due" and a "landmark development in protecting environmental quality and public health."

Reilly said the EPA — which first listed asbestos as a hazardous air pollutant in 1972 and urged its ban in 1979 — has taken too long to remove asbestos products from the marketplace.

"The first question I had was why has this thing been around so long," said Reilly, who was appointed this year.

Critics have accused the Reagan administration of blocking earlier EPA action.

Asbestos: Durable yet deadly product

Phasing out asbestos

A federal ban will end the manufacture of most products containing asbestos during the next seven years. It doesn't affect such products already in use.

Affected:

- Automobile brake pads and linings
- Concrete water distribution pipes
- Roofing shingles
- Floor and pipe wrapping
- Construction sheeting
- Gaskets

Not affected:

- Guided missile liners
- Acetylene (blowtorch) cylinders
- Some sealant tape and packaging

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Known in Roman times, asbestos was for many years one of the most welcomed of natural products. Its strength and resistance to heat made it ideal for many construction and insulation uses.

It was 10 times as strong as steel, yet it could be woven like cotton into a fabric that resisted flames and acids. It was tough enough to brake a speeding locomotive, and flexible enough to spray onto school building walls and ceilings for insulation.

During the first 80 years of this century, more than 30 million tons of asbestos found various uses in this country. Most was imported from Canada.

But its widespread use began to decline in the 1970s after pioneering research by Dr. Irving Selikoff of the Mt. Sinai School of Medicine in New York made it clear that exposure to microscopic, breathable asbestos particles can cause lung cancer and other severe illnesses such as mesothelioma, an incurable cancer of the chest and abdominal membranes, and asbestosis, a chronic disease of the lungs that makes breathing progressively more difficult.

The word asbestos actually is a generic term for a variety of minerals with tightly woven structures that provide unusual strength and flexibility.

The most commonly used asbestos is chrysotile, a white magnesium silicate mined mainly in Quebec. Other commercial forms of asbestos are crocidolite, a blue tinged compound, and amosite, which is brown. Both are mined in South Africa.

Asbestos was used most extensively from the end of World War II until the early 1970s.

In 1972, the Environmental Protection Agency listed asbestos as a hazardous air pollutant, and in 1978 it restricted its uses, banning spray-on asbestos insulation.

Asbestos use in the United States fell from 240,000 metric tons in 1984 to 85,000 metric tons in 1987.