



In a Montana Town, Working to Correct Years of Environmental Wrongs



Excavation of contaminated soil in progress.

Libby Asbestos

In northwestern Montana, seven miles northeast of the town of Libby, lies a vermiculite mine that operated for a century before shutting down in 1990. Once widely used as building insulation and more recently as a soil conditioner, vermiculite from the mine was eventually found to be contaminated with a toxic form of naturally-occurring asbestos fibers. Hundreds of former mine workers and Libby residents have been diagnosed with asbestos related disease. Many have died of illness caused by asbestos exposure. Today, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is partnering with other federal and state agencies to clean up years of contamination at areas affected by the mine's operation, as well as areas where contaminated vermiculite was placed—including homes and businesses in Libby.

Contaminated Vermiculite Distributed Across Town

During peak production, as much as 80 percent of the world's supply of vermiculite came from the northwest Montana mine. For years, many people in Libby received vermiculite free of charge from W.R. Grace (the company that acquired the mine in 1963) and used it liberally in businesses and homes as insulation, in gardens as a soil conditioner, and as fill for school running tracks and football fields as well as other construction projects.

An Emergency Response is Needed

In November 1999, responding to local concerns regarding asbestos-contaminated vermiculite and related illness and death, EPA sent an Emergency Response team to Libby. By the end of that year EPA had collected nearly 700 samples of the town's air, soil, dust, and building insulation. The test results, which indicated that many of the town's homes and businesses contained substantial quantities of asbestiform fibers, were released to Libby's residents before being made available to the media and general public. In January 2002, the Governor of Montana requested that the area affected by the vermiculite mine be added to EPA's National Priorities List.

JUST THE FACTS:

- EPA has successfully cleaned up several of the town's most affected residences. All residential and business cleanups in Libby are expected to be complete in 2005.
- In a coordinated effort involving EPA, other federal, state and local agencies, all of Libby's citizens were eligible for x-rays, lung function tests, and interviews designed to better understand how people may have been exposed to asbestos.
- To date, Superfund has committed more than \$56 million to clean up Libby and the surrounding areas.

Staffed by local residents, EPA opened an Information Center that responds to as many as 200 inquiries per week. Public meetings are held periodically to discuss sampling results and the status of cleanup activities.

A Coordinated Effort to Undo the Damage

EPA subsequently conducted a detailed investigation of the area. Based on the results, EPA cleaned up several of the town's most affected residential properties, as well as three vermiculite processing areas and six other non-residential sites. In a coordinated effort involving EPA, the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, and the Lincoln County Department of Environmental Health, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry conducted the country's largest asbestos medical screening. Through this \$6 million effort, all of Libby's current and former residents older than 18 years qualified for x-rays, lung function tests, and lengthy interviews designed to better understand how people may have been exposed to asbestos.

The citizens of Libby themselves became involved in the effort to protect and clean up their town. Staffed by local residents, EPA opened an Information Center that responds to as many as 200 inquiries per week. Public meetings are held periodically to discuss sampling results and the status of cleanup activities. EPA facilitated the establishment of a Community Advisory Group (CAG) that met bi-weekly through April 2002 and now meets once per month. EPA serves as a resource to the CAG and attends every meeting. In addition, EPA representatives meet with Libby's business community and real estate professionals to try and resolve issues regarding the economic effect of the town's asbestos cleanup effort.

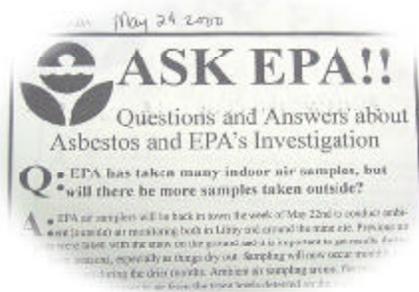
To date, Superfund has committed more than \$56 million to clean up Libby and the surrounding areas affected by the former vermiculite mine. While EPA is seeking reimbursement of assessment and cleanup costs from W.R. Grace, the Agency recognizes that swift identification and removal of asbestos contamination is what the town needs most. With an estimated, additional \$21 million expected to be committed to this effort in 2003, EPA is making sure that the outlook for public health, the environment, and the economy in Libby continues to improve. All residential and business clean-ups in Libby are expected to be complete in 2005.

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Visit the EPA Region 2 web site at:
<http://www.epa.gov/region8/Superfund/libby>



One of EPA's informational announcements for Libby residents.