



Highlights of [GAO-08-71](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Between 1923 and the early 1990s, a mine near Libby, Montana, shipped millions of tons of asbestos-contaminated vermiculite ore to sites throughout the United States. In 2000, EPA began to clean up asbestos contamination at the Libby mine and evaluate those sites that received the ore to determine if they were contaminated. Under Superfund program regulations and guidance, EPA regional offices took steps to inform affected communities of contamination problems and agency efforts to address them.

GAO was asked to (1) describe the status of EPA's and other federal agencies' efforts to assess and address potential risks at the facilities that received contaminated Libby ore and (2) determine the extent and effectiveness of EPA's public notification efforts about cleanups at sites that received Libby ore. GAO, among other steps, convened focus groups in three of the affected communities to address these issues.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends, among other things, that the EPA Administrator (1) consider the results of EPA's asbestos risk and toxicity assessment to determine whether any affected sites need to be reevaluated and (2) review regions' implementation of public notification provisions and guidance to ensure that they appropriately determine the extent of outreach needed. EPA expressed general agreement.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-71](#). For more information, contact John B. Stephenson at (202) 512-3841 or [stephensonj@gao.gov](mailto:stephensonj@gao.gov).

## HAZARDOUS MATERIALS

### EPA May Need to Reassess Sites Receiving Asbestos-Contaminated Ore from Libby, Montana, and Should Improve Its Public Notification Process

#### What GAO Found

Since 2000, EPA has evaluated 271 sites thought to have received asbestos-contaminated ore from Libby, Montana, but did so without key information on safe exposure levels for asbestos. Based on these evaluations, 19 sites were found to be contaminated with asbestos from the Libby ore and needed to be cleaned up. EPA or the state of jurisdiction generally led or oversaw the cleanups. In general, a cleanup would be performed if sampling results indicated asbestos was present in amounts greater than 1 percent (based on the percentage area in a microscopic field) in soils or debris or greater than 0.1 asbestos fibers per cubic centimeter of air. However, these standards are not health-based and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry found that the sampling and analysis methods EPA used at most of the sites it examined were limited and have since been improved. The EPA Office of Inspector General reported in December 2006 that EPA had not completed an assessment of the toxicity of the asbestos in the Libby ore. Until it completes this assessment, EPA cannot be assured that the Libby site itself is cleaned to safe levels, nor will it know the extent to which the sites that received Libby ore may need to be reevaluated. EPA has agreed to complete a risk and toxicity assessment by the end of fiscal year 2010.

EPA regional offices did not implement key provisions of the agency's public notification regulations at 8 of the 13 sites for which EPA had lead responsibility. At four sites, for example, EPA either did not provide and maintain documentation about the cleanups for public review and comment or provide for a public comment period. Also, although EPA guidance emphasizes that simply complying with the public notification rules is often insufficient to meet communities' needs, at five sites EPA did not go beyond these provisions. Reaction among community members to EPA's public notification measures was mixed. At two of the three sites in which GAO held focus groups with affected community members, participants were critical of EPA's efforts to inform them about the cleanup of the asbestos-contaminated sites in their neighborhood. These included participants in Hamilton Township, New Jersey and Minot, North Dakota who noted that newspaper notices did not identify asbestos as the contaminant in question and contained unclear and bureaucratic language. On the other hand, participants in Dearborn, Michigan praised EPA efforts to, among other things, hold public meetings and hand-deliver written notices.