

Remarks by Senator Murray on Asbestos Exposure and Workplace Safety

July 31, 2001

This afternoon we're going to hear testimony about asbestos exposure. Like many Americans, I thought asbestos was banned years ago. In fact, if you read the newspapers, you'd think so too. Here's an article from the Associated Press from just three days ago. It's titled "Asbestos forces College of William and Mary Freshmen Out of Dorm." The article explains that asbestos was discovered in a freshman dormitory. Today, it's common for parts of older buildings -- from here in the Dirksen Senate Building to the Kennedy Center Opera House -- to be closed to remove asbestos. But this story says that asbestos was -- quote -- "banned in 1977." Tragically, that's just not true. Asbestos was not banned. Today, it's in consumer products. It is handled by workers every day. And it's still a health danger.

Many Americans think asbestos was banned, because for years in the 1980's, the Environmental Protection Agency tried to ban it. Unfortunately, the asbestos industry brought a lawsuit and convinced an appeals court to overturn the ban in 1991. Although the EPA was able to prevent new uses of this dangerous substance, asbestos remains legal for use in consumer products.

Let me give you a few examples of how workers may be exposed to asbestos today. In garages and repair shops, auto mechanics are repairing brakes, which may be tainted with asbestos. In many homes -- attics, roofs, and crawlspaces are lined with Zonolite insulation -- which was made with vermiculite from Libby, Montana. In garden centers, nursery workers are handling products made with vermiculite, which may be contaminated with asbestos. On construction sites across the country, workers are handling roofing materials that contain asbestos. And, finally, miners who mine for talc, taconite and vermiculite may be exposed to asbestos at work. So the sad truth is asbestos was not banned and is still used today.

Asbestos ends up in commercial products like brake pads and roofing material intentionally. But it also ends up in consumer product by accident. For example, many lawn care products contain vermiculite. Unfortunately, when that vermiculite is ored, it may contain traces of asbestos. So the asbestos ends up in a bag of fertilizer -- not on purpose -- but through contamination. This is known as contaminant asbestos.

Now the EPA says those small amounts won't hurt me as a consumer, but what about all the workers who created that product? And what should the government do to protect those workers and the public from a known carcinogen? I called for this hearing to raise awareness about the dangers of asbestos, to find out what protections are in place for workers today, and to learn what steps we could take to further protect American workers.

I became aware of the ongoing dangers of asbestos through a series of articles in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer. The series began with an investigation into a mine in Libby, Montana. For years, workers mined vermiculite at the W.R. Grace facility in Libby. Almost 200 people have died from exposure to asbestos in the mine. Many more residents are sick. In fact, dozens of those who are ill did not even work in the mine, but they were exposed to contamination in the air they breathed. The problem in Libby is so bad that the Environmental Protection Agency is considering declaring the town a Superfund site. It is the government's responsibility to protect public health. Unfortunately, the government failed to protect the people of Libby.

But the problem isn't limited to Libby, Montana as this map shows. The ore that was mined in Libby was sent to at least 33 states. Factories and plants in all of these states processed the tainted ore from Libby. Today, efforts are underway to further investigate exposure at 17 of these sites including a site in Spokane,

Washington.

The human cost of asbestos exposure is staggering. Today, workers are suffering from asbestosis and cancer. Unfortunately, it takes between 15 and 40 years for disease from asbestos to materialize. That means that years from now -- more people will become sick -- because of exposure that is occurring today.

This afternoon you will hear more about how asbestos and asbestiform fibers affect human health from several of the witnesses. You will also hear about how these diseases impact peoples' lives. I look forward to hearing about what federal agencies are doing to protect workers. So today with the help of our witnesses I hope we'll answer these questions and in the process help raise awareness about these dangers.

In conclusion, I am pleased that Senator Max Baucus, who has worked so hard on this issue, is here and will testify before us shortly. I also want to welcome Congressman Rehberg from Montana.