

EPA Urged to Push Forward with Asbestos Safety Standard

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BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — Montana lawmakers urged the Environmental Protection Agency on Thursday to push forward with a proposed asbestos safety standard that will guide the cleanup of a mountain town where hundreds have died from exposure to the dangerous material.

U.S. Sens. Max Baucus and Jon Tester said residents of Libby have grown frustrated waiting for a pending risk study to be completed. And the two Democrats accused chemical giant W.R. Grace Inc. of trying to cloud the science on the issue.

That comes after The Associated Press reported last month that Grace pressed for the study to be delayed.

The company mined asbestos-containing vermiculite in Libby for decades. The EPA's proposed standard concludes even a tiny amount of the material can lead to lung problems. It would be 5,000 times tougher than the standard used in past cleanups addressing airborne asbestos.

Maryland-based Grace has objected to the EPA's proposal, suggesting sites across the country could be subjected to costly cleanups.

But Baucus and Tester wrote in a Thursday letter to EPA administrator Lisa Jackson that it was time to move forward with the risk study. They blasted Grace for weighing in against the EPA proposal and alleged company officials had "traded profits for lives" in Libby.

Health officials say hundreds of people have been killed in Libby and many more sickened by exposure to asbestos dust. The material came from the Grace mine outside town and processing plants along the Kootenai River.

"We are not surprised to find Grace trying to cloud the science or hide behind the speculative liability of other property owners," the senators wrote. "Whatever the state of cleanups at Libby and other contaminated sites around the country, we must face the reality of how toxic Libby (asbestos) really is."

The ongoing Superfund cleanup in Libby has cost at least \$447 million since 1999 and is expected to last several more years. The town of about 3,000 people is about 40 miles south of the Canadian border.

W.R. Grace spokesman Greg Euston said Thursday that the company would not comment on the senators' remarks.

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In public testimony and filings with the EPA, Grace has argued lung problems considered a sign of asbestos disease can be confused with other health issues such as obesity. The company maintains that the science used by the EPA to craft its proposal was flawed and has urged more research.

Manufacturing and trade groups and federal agencies including the White House Office of Management and Budget also have questioned the EPA proposal. They said the low threshold falls below even background asbestos levels seen in parts of the country.

An EPA spokesman in the agency's regional office in Denver referred questions to agency headquarters in Washington, D.C., where officials did not return messages from The Associated Press seeking comment.

The EPA is to make a final decision on the standard for Libby sometime next year.

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