

Asbestos study brings adjustments

El Dorado residents try to gauge risk, precautions.

By Carrie Peyton Dahlberg -- Bee Staff Writer
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Anxious or cavalier, angry or curious, El Dorado County residents and officials Monday were sizing up how a new federal asbestos study could affect their lives and their health.

For the first time, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has tried to assess the ways that outdoor activities - how kids and adults run and play - might boost their exposure to naturally occurring asbestos.

It concluded that baseball, basketball and bicycling all are among activities that can kick up increased asbestos-laden dust at some sites, raising the amount of tiny, toxic fibers that a person inhales.

What is still unknown, and the question that lingered in the minds of many on Monday, is what does that mean in regard to how people go about their daily lives?

"What is the risk of being on the softball field vs. riding in the car vs. getting hit by lightning? Folks need to have that information," said Laura Gill, El Dorado County's chief administrative officer.

Denise Hountalis, who was watching her 2-year-old play with his toy trucks in a sandbox at El Dorado Hills Community Park, said the EPA report has left her wondering how widespread the problem truly is, and how careful she needs to be.

"Can't we just go out for a walk?" she asked as she sat in the warm afternoon sun. "My feeling is you can't keep kids holed up in the house all day."

For their part, county officials walked a cautious line, saying they were concerned about public health and eager to learn all they could, but also eager to have the spotlight broadened into a nationwide look at naturally occurring asbestos.

Without such comparisons, asked Jon Morgan, the county's environmental management director, "how do we know we have a problem?"

"How do we know the emissions (measured by the EPA) didn't come from Placer or Amador County? How do we know that downtown Sacramento doesn't have much worse than our conditions?"

It's OK for El Dorado County to be "picked on" if that leads to greater understanding of the issue nationwide, Morgan said. "I want everyone to pay attention. Asbestos is an emotional issue, so let's make sure we do it right."

It's unclear what, if anything, the county needs to do in response to this new report, given that El Dorado is already active on the issue and that more work needs to be done nationally, he said.

El Dorado County has been working since last summer on expanded dust-control regulations, which could be issued in the next two to three months.

It hopes to pull together tips on protective steps the public could take, such as closing windows on windy days, taking off shoes outdoors, or dusting with a damp cloth, so that people can act based on their own comfort levels, Gill said.

"We make those kinds of decisions every day," she said, about everything from the foods we eat to what sports we enjoy.

Gill, who lives in El Dorado Hills, lets her children play in the tot lot that was one focus of EPA measurements, but she adds, "I'm also letting my daughter learn how to ride horses, and that has its own set of problems. Look at Christopher Reeve."

Fibers from naturally occurring asbestos, found in rocks that run through portions of El Dorado County, can lodge in the lungs and decades later cause mesothelioma, a cancer of the chest and other membranes.

The long exposure period and mobility of foothill residents has some people fearing that the true effect is being soft-pedaled by those whose financial health is tied to the county's growth.

Bernard Schur, a Sacramento retiree, said he worries about his 8-and 11-year-old grandchildren, who are growing up in El Dorado Hills.

"I believe there are people who either consciously or subconsciously are more worried about the economic impact of having asbestos in their community than they are in the long-term effects on families and children," he said.

County Supervisor Helen Baumann said the Sierra foothills in general, and El Dorado County in particular, offer "a very healthy, very safe environment."

She is one of only two county supervisors authorized by her colleagues to speak publicly on what has been a difficult issue for the county. Baumann said she's been giving interviews and tracking calls from national television networks and other media.

The trouble with the study released Monday, she said, is that "we don't know how to put that data into context. That science is going to take some time."

She urged people to attend upcoming meetings on the subject.

As the research evolves, those who live and work in El Dorado County are making their own best guesses on how to juggle today's choices with a disease that might lurk decades away.

Al Alegria, 66, a regular jogger at Community Park, now avoids running on dirt areas, such as paths or baseball infields. "I figure if I run on grass it's better for you," he said.

John Willis, a building contractor who remodels homes throughout the El Dorado County foothills, said he plans to ask his insurance company what liabilities he might face when moving dirt around.

Meanwhile, Jackson School, in the Rescue School District, has shut down the educational garden where its students once learned how seeds could turn into the foods they eat.

The closure came after officials learned the EPA had some concerns but before seeing any firm data, said Vicki Barber, county superintendent of schools, who described the measure as an interim precaution.

While asbestos is still being studied, she said, "a prudent course of action would be to not have students digging around in the dirt."

Smog season begins Sunday; more bad-air days expected following last year's record low number

By: DAVE DOWNEY - Staff Writer

North County Times [serving San Diego and Riverside counties]

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Forget about feasting your eyes much longer on views of clear blue skies and snowcapped mountains. It won't be long before a gloomy haze settles over western Riverside County, muddying the sky and eclipsing the mountain skyline.

Soon, too, many will notice it is harder to breathe.

Several times over the next six months, young children, the elderly and people suffering from asthma, emphysema and other respiratory ailments will be warned by regional air-quality officials to take it easy or stay indoors, as pollution levels soar off the charts.

Welcome to smog season in Southern California. It officially arrives Sunday and lasts through October.

Just as surely as the sun will rise tomorrow, concentrations of ozone, a colorless but pungent and poisonous gas, will shoot up as temperatures climb into the 90s and 100s. Poisonous ozone, the

key component of smog, will be manufactured when hydrocarbons and nitrogen oxides belched by cars and factories are given opportunity to cook in the hot sun. Smog also is composed of tiny particles that paint skies with a murky haze.

That toxic brew tends to blow into the county from the heavily populated coastal areas like clockwork on summer afternoons.

In 2004, cooler-than-normal weather prevented that chain reaction from occurring as often, or as strongly, as in earlier years. The result was a record low number of bad-air days ---- 27 ---- for the air basin that covers western Riverside and San Bernardino counties, all of Orange County and much of Los Angeles County. That was fewer than half the number in 2003.

John Purpura, a 61-year-old Lake Elsinore man who suffers from lung disease, noticed the difference.

"I felt much better," he said. "I could go outside a lot more than I could in other summers."

In part because of the marked improvement, Purpura gave up his nationwide search for a healthier place to live.

"I had actually considered moving away," he said. "But other than going to some Kansas cowtown, I couldn't find any place that didn't have a similar (pollution) problem. So I figured that I would just stick it out here because they really are working on the problem here."

According to reports, half of the nation's nearly 300 million residents live in areas plagued by unhealthy air. Scientific studies have fingered elevated ozone levels for premature deaths and respiratory ailments.

Breathing easier

Whether Purpura and other western Riverside County residents will be able to breathe as easily this summer is anyone's guess. Early indications are that the smog season of 2005 may be worse than the previous one.

"There is a very good chance that temperatures will be above normal," said Brad Doyle, a forecaster for the National Weather Service in San Diego.

If that long-range forecast holds, said Bill Patzert, a climatologist at Caltech's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, it does not bode well because ozone levels are tied to hot weather.

"Big smog days are high temperature days," Patzert said.

Make no mistake, said Jerry Martin, spokesman for the California Air Resources Board in Sacramento, "we are slaves to the weather."

One need only look back at 2003 to see how much influence weather has. During that hot and stagnant summer, Southern California logged more than twice as many unhealthy days as in 2004 ---- 68 for the four-county air basin.

Conditions in that basin are the responsibility of the Diamond Bar-based South Coast Air Quality Management District, which regulates pollution coughed up by factories, refineries and power plants, and issues daily air-quality forecasts during the six-month-long season.

While those forecasts address only what is likely to occur the next day, district meteorologist Joe Cassmassi said last week he expects the region to log more bad-air days than last year ---- somewhere around 35 ---- but far fewer than in summer 2003.

Because of a cool, wet winter and spring, Cassmassi said, the pollution season is likely to get off to a quiet start with moderate air-quality readings prevailing early on before hot and stagnant conditions set in around mid-summer.

"We probably won't see any heavier-than-average smog levels until August or September," he said.

Reaching a plateau

Whatever the case, Southern Californians will continue to breathe in some of the nation's worst air.

A report released Thursday by the American Lung Association rated neighboring San Bernardino County as having the worst smog, based on records for 2001-03. The next worst, in order, were Kern, Fresno, Riverside, Tulare, Los Angeles and Merced counties. The county surrounding Houston ---- Harris ---- was ranked eighth worst. It was the only county outside California to make the top 10.

As bad as conditions are, they were worse.

Jim Lents, director of UC Riverside's Center for Sustainable Suburban Development, said Southern California ozone levels dropped an average of 7 percent a year from 1984 to 2004.

What's discouraging, however, is that the rate of reduction has been falling. There has been virtually no improvement since the turn of the century, Lents said.

"There is reason to be concerned," he said. "There has been a little bit of plateauing in recent years, which is scary."

Lents blamed the plateau in large part on the popularity of gas-guzzling sport utility vehicles and large passenger trucks, which pollute more than fuel-efficient compacts.

"Hopefully, this trend toward buying bigger, higher-polluting cars will prove to be an aberration," he said.

If that trend doesn't make a U-turn, Patzert said, there is a danger air-quality improvements will be eclipsed.

"Our personal habits are going to overwhelm all that," Patzert said, adding, "people should be fined for having Hummers."

Growth reverses gains

Pat Kudell, executive director for the American Lung Association of the Inland Counties, said there also is a danger that the relentless population growth in Riverside and San Bernardino counties will wipe out gains.

"It's hard to be optimistic when you are having the kind of building that we are having right now," Kudell said. "It's just bringing so many new people to this area. It's a very nice area to live, unfortunately."

According to a new U.S. Census Bureau report, Riverside County added nearly 90,000 residents last year and now is home to 1.9 million people. The county's population is expected to approach 3 million by 2020.

With all that growth, Kudell suggested it is unlikely Southern California will meet a 2021 deadline for complying with federal limits for ozone pollution for an eight-hour period.

"People would have to park their vehicles and take rapid transit," he said. "And that's not going to happen."

Lents is more optimistic. He noted Southern California has managed to trim the number of bad-air days from about 200 a year in the late 1970s to 27, and significantly reduce peak ozone concentrations, despite huge population growth.

He predicted the clean-air standard would be achieved by 2017.

Lents said projections are that ozone levels will fall 30 percent between now and 2015 with existing control measures. And while that isn't enough to deliver clean air by 2021, there are signs more action will be taken, he said.

Federal regulators are considering tightening screws on ships, trains and airplanes, and state regulators are looking to clean up pollution from commercial trucks. Meanwhile, cars keep getting cleaner, and more people are shopping for gas-electric hybrids.

As well, Lents said, the soaring high gas prices seem to be curbing demand for those popular sport utility vehicles and oversized passenger trucks.

"There are ways to do it if we can get away from our appetite for these monstrous vehicles," he said.

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[Fresno Bee editorial, Tuesday, May 3, 2005](#)

The public interest

Expanding air district's board will limit special interests' power.

A crucial change in the makeup of the Valley air district's governing board will be on the table this week for elected leaders in Fresno and Fresno County. One group of those leaders has already taken a position in defense of the status quo — which in this context means continued bad air in the Valley.

The issue at hand is Senate Bill 999, authored by state Sen. Mike Machado, D-Linden. The bill would strengthen the leadership of the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District's board by adding members to speak directly for the public and to give medical and scientific input to the board.

The Fresno County Board of Supervisors is already on record opposing the change. The Fresno City Council today will consider a resolution supporting it. It's not clear which way the council will move, and Fresno Mayor Alan Autry is opposing the bill.

We urge the council to take a stand for the people of the Valley against those who resist regulations that would clean up the air we all breathe.

The bill would expand the board from 11 to 17 members, give a permanent seat to each of the Valley's three biggest cities — Fresno, Bakersfield and Stockton — and create four "public" seats. The governor would fill two of those: one with transportation or urban planning expertise, the other with an expert on the environmental effects of air pollution. The Assembly speaker would appoint a member of the "environmental justice community," and the Senate Rules Committee would choose a doctor with "expertise regarding the health effects of air pollution."

Those are useful changes. The current board, made up of elected officials from eight counties, too often hears only the voices of developers, the oil industry and others who oppose changes

that could cost them money. The result is a pace of improvement as stagnant as the summer air here.

Fresno Council Member Jerry Duncan, who opposes the changes, put his finger — inadvertently — on why they are so badly needed. In a memo last week, Duncan said the four new public members might represent "narrow special interests." But that's exactly what we have with the current board — special interests calling the shots.

There is one group that would be very well-served by Machado's proposed changes — those of us who breathe the Valley's filthy air. How about offering a little support for that special interest?

[Stockton Record, Letters to the Editor, Tuesday, May 3, 2005](#)

It's about time to regulate the regulators

Why are people complaining about the high price of gasoline and diesel in California?

The national average last week was \$2.28 for unleaded regular. I paid \$1.97 in Branson, Mo., at the same time San Francisco hit \$3.

In California, we want clean air, clean water and reduced smog. This need gives us all the regulators and elected officials who make the rules for the good of all of us.

We also have state mandates to take the lead out of gasoline. In the private sector, we call these nonproduct-producing inspectors and regulators overhead. And, boy, does this state have that.

The prices we're paying don't stop at the fuel nozzle. A fuel surcharge is being added to almost everything you buy that has to be transported. Contractors and service organizations must add this cost to new homes and any repairs people need.

Our governor wants to cut overhead by reducing and combining boards and commissions --or maybe eliminating some entirely.

This might reduce the overhead and help reduce the state's deficit.

Jack Coffelt, Stockton

[Stockton Record, Letters to the Editor, Tuesday, May 3, 2005](#)

Is Amador County air really that good?

Since I live in Amador County and am a subscriber to The Record, I object to the lack of information about air quality here.

I can believe our air is better than average -- as it's the most beautiful county in the state.

However, I'd like to see some backup for my belief. The lack of coverage makes me wonder if Amador subscribers are just a necessary nuisance?

Beverly Timmer, Amador County