

Star-Telegram

Report raises concerns about asbestos at 2007 Fort Worth demolition

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The EPA's approval of an experimental asbestos demolition method at a Fort Worth apartment building in 2007 may have exposed workers and the public to carcinogenic fibers, according to a new federal report. The EPA should notify all workers who took part in the experiment and people who were in the vicinity of the work, according to the report from the agency's inspector general.

Fort Worth was the first urban area to test a "wet" method of demolition, in which crews can take down a building without first removing the asbestos. Instead, workers soak walls and ceilings with soapy or foamy water during demolition to try to keep the fibers from being released into the air. Fort Worth used the method to demolish a building at the Oak Hollow apartments on Boca Raton Boulevard.

The technique is an alternative to the EPA's approved methods. The wet method was intended to save money as well as offer additional protection to workers, who could stand several yards away while soaking a structure.

However, settled-dust results obtained from testing during demolition experiments at Fort Chaffee, Ark., and at the Oak Hollow apartments "demonstrated asbestos fiber releases," according to an inspector general's "early warning report."

Use of the "unapproved methods threatens health and safety," the report says. But Fort Worth officials said the report -- a two-page memo -- is unclear since it recommends that "EPA should assess whether any authorizations resulted in potential asbestos exposure of workers or the public, and notify them accordingly."

Michael Gange, a city assistant director over environment management, said a pending study will give far greater detail and data on the demolition technique, but that study hasn't been published. Gange was at the apartment site when the demolition was conducted and said he saw no emissions during the demolition.

"Basically they're saying, 'Hey, you found some potential emissions; did you actually have an exposure or not? You need to assess that and find that out.'" Asked whether Fort Worth would conduct such an assessment, Gange said the assessment request made by the inspector general was for EPA scientists to review the data.

Public Justice, a national public advocacy group, said that it had long urged the EPA to shut down its asbestos-removal experiments but that the agency would not. Public Justice and the Natural Resources Defense Council filed a Freedom of Information Act request to get the underlying data about the experiments. The EPA did not release most of the documents-- more than 26,000 pages -- until after the groups sued to force disclosure, according to the group's website.

"The released documents include several showing that one of the EPA's own senior scientists found that the asbestos-removal tests did not comply with health and safety standards and may have endangered demolition workers and agency employees," the group said.

Jim Hecker, the director of Public Justice's Environmental Enforcement Project, said he hopes that the new report "will finally put the nail in the coffin of this unapproved and dangerous method of asbestos removal."

The EPA said it is investigating allegations of ongoing human-health threats from improper asbestos removal and disposal. "The agency will take whatever steps are necessary to protect the health of anyone who might be exposed. Moreover, if there have been past incidents of exposure, the EPA will take appropriate steps to identify them and to address any health threats," said a memorandum from Bob Perciasepe, EPA deputy administrator.

In Fort Worth four years ago, demolition work began in the early morning as nearby pedestrians walked to school. An excavator flattened the apartments' office building. The EPA had set up rows of air-sampling monitors at the site.

"Video footage and photos show government employees and contractors at the demolition sites without personal protective equipment, a possible violation of OSHA asbestos worker protection requirements," the inspector general's report says.

Settled-dust results indicate that asbestos escaped the restricted areas, so unprotected workers adjacent to the restricted areas and any members of the public in the vicinity of the sites may have been exposed, the report says. The EPA should identify the workers who were present and notify them according to OSHA regulations, according to the report.

In 2007, the EPA and the Department of State Health Services agreed not to enforce regulations so that the demolition test could take place. At the time, there was a long-running national debate over how best to demolish asbestos-contaminated structures.

Public Justice had successfully held off a similar process in Fort Worth in 2005, Hecker said. The federal government requires that asbestos be removed from buildings before they are demolished.

Asbestos is a human carcinogen with no safe level of exposure. Asbestos exposure can lead to serious diseases such as asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma. The diseases can develop decades after exposure.