

## EPA tackles town's deadly dust

By NICHOLAS K. GERANIOS  
*Associated Press*

LIBBY, Mont. - Yvonne Resch remembers thinking as a child that the vermiculite mine only added to the area's natural beauty - its lights on Zonolite Mountain looked like a castle.

But the mine and its processing plants spewed asbestos over her town for more than 70 years, coating homes, schools and ball fields. Now her father, mother and two brothers are among many residents who suffer the coughing, hacking and wheezing of asbestos-related diseases, which have been blamed in more than 200 deaths since the late 1990s.

The Environmental Protection Agency took the unprecedented step this week of declaring Libby a federal public health emergency, vowing to finish a cleanup that has lan-

guished for nearly a decade.

The agency pledged at least \$125 million to speed the work of going door-to-door, raising tents over contaminated homes, removing contaminated soil and vacuuming out attics and any other surface once contaminated by miners returning from work.

The declaration has so far been met with Western stoicism. Many residents seem to have accepted that they share this scenic valley of towering pines and snow-covered mountain peaks with a silent killer.

For decades ore was brought to processing plants in Libby, where a smokestack released up to 24,000 pounds of dust a day. Asbestos-contaminated mine waste - known as tailings - was also used to line an elementary school skating rink and to build running

tracks at local junior high and high schools.

The vermiculite - which was used to make Zonolite brand insulation for millions of U.S. homes - was contaminated with naturally occurring asbestos mineral fibers, which can be inhaled and can cause mesothelioma, asbestosis and lung cancer. As a result, the local population was devastated.

Libby, which has 2,600 residents, suffers 40 to 80 times the national average in its rate of death from asbestosis, a breathing disorder caused by inhaling asbestos fibers. Lung-cancer mortality is 30 percent higher than what would be expected for the town.

Prosecutors detailed the extent of the health problems and the number of deaths blamed on asbestos during a recent trial of mine owner W.R.

Grace & Co. and three former executives. They were acquitted last month of knowingly allowing residents of Libby to be exposed to asbestos.

The Maryland-based company didn't deny that asbestos came from its mine which closed in 1990, but said it has acted responsibly to clean up the contamination. It paid millions in medical bills for residents of Libby and Troy and agreed last year to pay \$250 million to reimburse the EPA for cleanup efforts.

The EPA has already removed contaminants from more than 1,100 homes in Libby. The agency has been cleaning about 150 properties per year. The new federal money will speed the home-by-home cleanup of about 900 additional properties in Libby and the nearby town of Troy.

# EPA declares asbestos health emergency in Montana town

BY MATTHEW DALY  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON - The Obama administration said Wednesday it will pump more than \$130 million into a Montana town where asbestos contamination has been blamed for more than 200 deaths.

Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa Jackson said the EPA for the first time has determined there is a public health emergency in a contaminated community, targeting Libby, Mont., for immediate federal attention.

Jackson's announcement will not result in an evacuation of Libby's 2,600 residents but will require an extensive, home-by-home cleanup and better health protections for those with asbestos-related illnesses.

The EPA will invest at least \$125 million over the next five years in the ongoing cleanup of Libby and Troy, Mont., a nearby town of about 1,000. The Health and Human Services Department will spend an additional \$6 million on medical assistance for area residents suffering from asbestos-related illnesses.

The money is in addition to hundreds of millions of dollars the government and Maryland-based W.R. Grace & Co. have spent to clean up Libby, where asbestos contamination from a now-closed vermiculite mine has been cited in the deaths of more than 200 people and illnesses of thousands more.

Before the vermiculite mine was closed in 1990, miners carried asbestos home on their clothes. Vermiculite once covered school running tracks in Libby and some residents used vermiculite as mulch in their home gardens.

Jackson called Libby a "tragic public health situation" that has not received the recognition it deserves from the federal government for far too long.

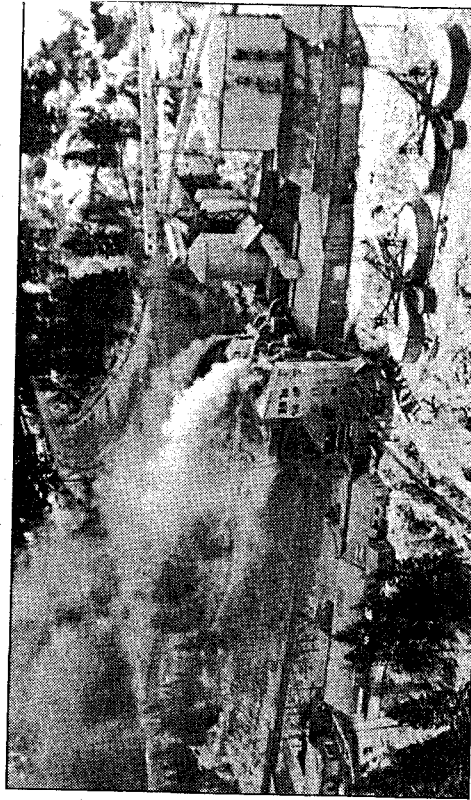
"We're making a long-delayed commitment to the people of Libby and Troy," she said. "Based on a rigorous re-evaluation of the situation on the ground, we will continue to move aggressively on the cleanup efforts and protect the health of the people. We're here to help create a long and prosperous future for this town."

Jackson said the announcement was the first time the EPA has made such a determination under authority of the 1980 Superfund law that requires cleanup of contaminated sites. Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., called the emergency declaration a great day for Libby, which he said "had to wait year after year as the last administration failed to determine that a public health emergency exists."

The EPA had previously declared the area a Superfund site but had not determined there was a public health emergency until Wednesday.

Last fall, Baucus accused the Bush administration of orchestrating a "conspiracy" for not declaring an emergency in Libby. He charged that former EPA Administrator Christine Todd Whitman was prepared to declare an emergency in 2002 but was overruled by the Bush White House.

Baucus called the health announcement especially welcome, given what he called a disappointing verdict last month in a criminal case related to the asbestos contamination. W.R. Grace & Co. and three former executives were acquitted of federal



Lincoln County District Court

An undated photo shows the now-closed vermiculite mine near Libby, Mont. Asbestos contamination from the mine has been blamed for more than 200 deaths.

charges that they knowingly allowed residents of the northwestern Montana town to be exposed to asbestos from its vermiculite mine.

A Grace spokesman did not return a telephone call Wednesday. The company has not denied that asbestos came from its mine but has said it acted responsibly to clean up the contamination. It paid millions in medical bills for residents of Libby and Troy and agreed last year to pay \$250 million to reimburse the EPA for cleanup efforts.

Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., called the emergency declaration long overdue.

"We still have a long way to do right by the folks in Libby," he said.

Gayla Benefield of Libby, who suffers health effects from asbestos exposure and lost both parents to asbestos-related lung diseases, called the declaration "a giant step forward" for improved medical care and cleanup of the town.

"Right now the amount of money is relatively minimal, but overall the biggest thing is that it opens the door for future money to be available for medical care, research - the things we've needed, independent of W.R. Grace in terms of health care," she said.