Fears confirmed about natural asbestos contamination in Sacramento suburb

By BRIAN MELLEY The Associated Press

EL DORADO HILLS, Calif. — A huge cloud of construction dust blowing across the field where his son played Little League signaled to Lance McMahan it was time to get out of this fast-growing suburb above Sacramento.

Watching from a lawn chair as bulldozers reshaped a nearby hillside into another setting for highpriced homes, McMahan knew that the ground getting torn up and carried by the wind over the baseball diamond contained natural veins of asbestos.

"That was like the last straw," said McMahan, recalling the day six years ago when he decided his family's health was more important than staying in their foothills home of five years.

The Environmental U.S. Protection Agency recently confirmed the fears of McMahan and many other people in El Dorado Hills, but also created a dust-up over property values and the pace of development in this wealthy community of 31,000 residents, where the median home price in May was

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In tests completed last October, the agency found elevated levels of a naturally occurring but particularly dangerous type of asbestos fiber at playing fields, a popular bike trail and a playground for toddlers. But the agency hasn't been able to quantify the risk to residents.

"It's bad, we just don't know how bad," said Jere Johnson, EPA's assessment manager for the site.

While the findings have led some to consider leaving, most folks are staying put for now. Some are angry at EPA for singling out their community without explaining the chances of getting cancer from inhaling invisible airborne asbestos fibers, which has led to fingerpointing and charges of fear-mon-

"We're not concerned about it," said Tom Ellenburg, who lives in a neighborhood near where the testing was done. "We don't sit around and breathe asbestos dust. We could go out in the street and dig around in it and sniff it up, but we don't do that.'

Danger from asbestos has lurked over communities worldwide for

generations, largely as a byproduct of mining or industry. It was once widely used in many household products, including home insula-

If inhaled, the needle-like asbestos fibers can cause life-threatening asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma, an incurable cancer of the chest lining.

Asbestos is found in 44 of California's 58 counties, usually in serpentine, the state rock. In its natural form it's considered harmless unless disturbed.

But the situation in El Dorado Hills is considered a greater threat by EPA because a more toxic form of asbestos, tremolite, is present and can be found close to the surface or even exposed.

Because it can take 20 to 40 years to develop an asbestos-related ailment, children are at a higher risk of exposure during their lifetime. In El Dorado Hills, a community planned a little more than a quarter century ago, that fact has been greeted with gallows humor.

Middle-aged residents joke that they needn't worry: they'll be dead before any disease is detected. Even their children have displayed a macabre outlook.

Some seniors sported T-shirts last year bearing the slogan, "I survived Oak Ridge High School asbestos," on the front. The back read, "Or did I?"

Terry Trent, a construction consultant who was the first to draw widespread attention to the problem, offers informal asbestos tours, getting wary looks from homeowners as he combs back tall grass looking for the culprit in the eroded embankments beyond their driveways.

"You can see how flaky this is," he said as a piece of the silvery white fiber corroded in his hand. "This whole hillside is shot through with

The hill is above the high school and adjacent to the community center.

The EPA's Superfund unit, charged with cleaning up life-threatening hazardous waste, performed the testing' after spending \$1.2 million to clean up asbestos on the grounds of Oak Ridge High School

In October, contractors in white suits and respirators spent a week simulating child's play to measure exposure. In the name of science, they slid into the bases on the ball field, pedaled and jogged along a popular trail, played basketball and soccer and gardened behind an elementary school.

"If you want a road to be like it's paved, you've got to pave it," Rice said. Dirt road improvements are especially troublesome in the South, where heavy rains and hot summers work against road hardeners, he said.

"You really have to have something you can hold together real tight," such as gravel used in pavement, he said. "Dirt's not made to hold together like that. It gets brittle, and it can crack.'

Compared to areas where no activity took place, cyclists created enough dust to be exposed to up to 43 times more asbestos; baseball stirred up as much as 22 times more asbestos; and soccer kicked up 16 times more asbestos.

While the EPA is confident about its findings, it's working on a way to explain the significance of the num-

Dr. Bruce Case, an epidemiology, pathology and occupational health professor at McGill University in Montreal who has studied asbestos for 25 years, said the huge exposure levels during exercise are enough to trigger serious concern.

Levels of tremolite measured by the EPA without any activity were similar to those found in the air of active mining towns in Quebec where blasting went on for a century, Case said.

"Anybody who's not worried about it is in complete denial. You can certainly say people are going to die and there are going to be increased cases of cancer," Case said. "I wouldn't live there, I wouldn't want my family to live there."

Before the EPA even released its findings publicly, Jon Morgan, the county's top environmental officer, issued a press release warning residents that the sloppy report "may unnecessarily scare the daylights out of every man, woman and child in El Dorado County."

The EPA fired back, saying Morgan's claims were false, irresponsible and he lacked an understanding of the problem.

Morgan went on a local cable television station to further shoot down the results before they were released. Michael Dennis, owner of Foothills 7 Television, said he ran with the program because the scope of the problem was unknown.

"Let's be reasonable here and get the truth out before we start freaking out," Dennis said. "It was really annoying that (the EPA) kept coming out with information that was scaring the living crap out of people without the science."

Dennis said he felt he achieved his goal when the EPA held its first public meeting in the community in early May. More than 1,000 people showed up, many openly hostile toward the EPA and many not knowing whom to believe.

El Dorado County is working on tougher dust control standards, but already requires developers to water down construction sites and wash tainted soils from truck tires so they don't track asbestos through town.

Some residents, however, complain the county has been slow to act on complaints of dust from construction that usually dissipates before one of the five employees certified to issue a citation can respond.

Marcella McTaggart, the county's air pollution control officer, defended enforcement efforts. In the first half of the month, the department received 13 complaints, stopping work twice until water trucks arrived to douse construction sites.

Despite suggestions from experts such as Case to halt construction, some plans call for a city of 80,000 people in 20 years.

As Vicki Summers, a mother of two, decides how she's going to cope with the intersecting realities of development and asbestos, she's taking several precautions.

She plans to have carpets that can hold asbestos fibers torn out of her house. She no longer runs fans. And she only vacuums when her boys aren't home.

Calendar -

You won't want to miss (It provides you with opportulead in fostering collaborati grams. So get ahead of tho online instead! Keynote s Wahl, comments from Lt. Corporation. Organizatio America (CMAA) Informatio No Details Available When Coast Highway, Huntingtor

FRIDAY, NOV 18 - GOLI ENGINEERING & GENERAL (This is a "No Frills" - "No

a Good Time with Your Fr Teams. Organization: Eng Information: Ambor Scott \$150.00 When: Hours: 6:00 Country Club, 3199 Stonefiel

MONDAY, AUG 1 - CLASSES BASIC ELECTRONIC ASSEMBLY

In this 390 hour course learn ment, including the use and care trial level skills in connecting and workmanship standards, color or ping (Mondays to Fridays, 6/ College/Centre City Center Inforn 7:00 AM - 10:00 AM Where: City 92101

MONDAY, AUG 1 - CLASSES ELECTRONIC TECHNICIAN

In this 700 hour course learn g sion and other sound systems, T ry in repair of malfunctioning elec-**Organization:** San Diego Commun 4500 Cost: No Cost When: Hour 5348 University Ave., San Diego

MONDAY, AUG 1 - CLASSES

ELECTRONIC TEST TECHNICIAN In this 900 hour course learn f theory and digital technology; pre-Certified Electronic Technician equipped laboratory. (Mondays to Community College/Centre City When: Hours: 5:00 PM - 8:30 PM San Diego, 92101

MONDAY, AUG 1 - CLASSES

COMMERCIAL PRINTING OPERATIO This course is an open entry/required for employment as a pre ations, and bindery operations. The paper stocks and materials, biddi layout and design, computer gene masking and platemaking, prope bindery operations. (Mondays t Community College/ECC Informa-7:00 AM - 1:00 PM Where: Educ Room 122, San Diego

MONDAY, AUG 1 - CLASSES

ELECTRONIC PREPRESS OPERATION An open entry/open exit mod employment as a pre-press operat er or bindery operator with supp includes safety procedures, stocks of job work orders, layout and desi camera operation, masking, platen hindery, equipment: (Mondays at Community College/ECC Informat 7:00 AM - 1:00 PM Where: Educi Room 122, San Diego

Monday, Aug 1 - CLASSES

STAMP MAKER/PRINTER

This course is designed to prov making rubber stamps. Classroom tools and equipment, composing stamps using vulcanization and m stamp molding, and assembling fir students will use includes; vertice machine, small and large vulcanize saw. (Mondays to Fridays, 6/10 College/North City Center Informat When: Hours: 12:30 PM - 3:30 PM San Diego Mission Road, Room 10

MONDAY, AUG 1 - CLASSES

BASIC ELECTRONIC ASSEMBLY In this 390 hour course learn fu ment, including the use and care or trial level skills in connecting and s workmanship standards, color cod ping. (Mondays to Thursdays, 6/ College/ECC Information: (619) 3-9:00 PM Where: Educational Cultu San Diego

TUESDAY, AUG 2 - CLASSES BACKHOE OPERATOR

This class is predominantly a h operation. Topics include: equipme dures and loading procedures. Orga 621-2313 www.safetycouncilonline AM - 5:00 PM Where: TBA, Please

THURSDAY, AUG 4 - CLASSES

PREVAILING WAGE LAW FOR PROJE Specialized training on how to av and supervise Prevailing Wage Pro. Contractors, Inc. Information: Ga When: Starts: 9:30 AM Where: AE 92064

FRIDAY, AUG 5 - SOCIAL EVENT: 4TH ANNUAL ABC PAC TRAP & S Shooter packages will include st

calls.

"It's always a challenge. In the winter when it's wet, you can get stuck. In the summer, it's all dust and sand, and you can get stuck in that. It happens quite frequently," said Tim' Crews, director of the county's Emergency Medical Service. "If we could get a dirt road that acted like a paved road, that would be a great help to us."

Settles says Pave-Zyme makes a road good for five to seven years, shorter than asphalt paving but still an improvement from plain dirt, although road officials were skeptical.

Experts warn the Pave-Zyme idea probably isn't a low-cost cure-all. Other hardeners have been tried before, and products

a quarterly newsletter on road technology for the Georgia Department of Transportation.

But Rice and other transportation officials aren't completely dismissing Pave-Zyme. The Georgia DOT is monitoring the Atlanta test and may consider endorsing it for local use