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Asbestos hotline takes on dust calls

County issued two stop-work orders at construction sites.

By Cathy Locke -- Bee Staff Writer

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Complaints about dust have resulted in two stop-work orders at construction sites since El Dorado County initiated a telephone hotline June 1, part of stepped-up efforts to monitor and reduce the impact of naturally occurring asbestos.

County officials provided that information during a town hall-style meeting Tuesday night in El Dorado Hills, a follow-up to May's forums with state and federal environmental experts.

Since the May 7 forum that drew an estimated 1,000 people, the county has launched its BEACON - Be Active Community Outreach Network - program. Modeled after crime-prevention programs, it encourages the public to report problems such as construction dust that increase health risks related to naturally occurring asbestos.

"We want to make sure the community has the information it needs to make good decisions and reduce risks," Laura Gill, county chief administrative officer, told an audience of about 75 people that included county staff members handling health and air-quality issues and residents from throughout western El Dorado County.

Gill said 13 dust complaints had been investigated since the hotline was initiated. Inspectors observed no dust, and no notices of violation were issued, she said in an interview. The two stop-work orders were issued because no water trucks were on site, Gill said.

County officials have said the goal is to respond to dust complaints within 30 minutes, and Gill said inspectors hit the mark on 11 of the 13 calls. The average response time was 16.2 minutes, she said.

In addition to engaging the public's help in monitoring construction activities, Environmental Management Director Jon Morgan said the Air Quality Management District is strengthening its construction-dust rules.

"We're doing our darnedest to buffer and provide protection measures almost to the point that some people think is ridiculous," he said.

County officials, who have been angered by the scrutiny the county has received from environmental regulatory agencies and the media, said they realize their actions are being watched.

Jim Embree, an El Dorado Hills resident and toxicologist with the consulting firm Geomatrix in Folsom, joined county officials at Tuesday's meeting. El Dorado County is at the forefront of scientific studies on the health effects of naturally occurring asbestos, he said.

"We can view it as being a target and people are picking on us, or that we're going to be part of the solution," Embree said.

Gill said the county plans to update maps to better identify the location of rock formations likely to contain asbestos. That information will help determine methods to reduce hazards and "whether we even need to be developing at that location," she said.

Public Health Director Gayle Erbe-Hamlin said her staff members are learning how to reduce health risks from naturally occurring asbestos. On Tuesday, she introduced a team of employees trained to field hotline queries on health-related issues such as controlling household dust that could contain asbestos fibers.

The department also is working with Marshall Medical to educate medical personnel about potential health effects of naturally occurring asbestos, she said.

Adrienne Kwong of El Dorado Hills urged Erbe-Hamlin and her staff members to also enlist the Kaiser Permanente and Sutter Health systems in education efforts. Kwong, a Kaiser retiree, said about 24 percent of El Dorado Hills and Folsom residents are Kaiser members.

Erbe-Hamlin said Sacramento County health officials are providing educational programs for those medical groups.

Norm Rowett, a member of the El Dorado Hills incorporation committee, expressed concern about large loads of fill dirt hauled in for a subdivision near Folsom Lake. "Do we know where the dirt they bring in comes from?" he asked.

Marcella McTaggart, air pollution control officer, said Air Quality Management District rules address soil exported from El Dorado County sites. But, she said, neither current nor proposed rules require testing of soil brought into the county.

Morgan said the state does not call for that level of regulation.

A resident also complained that contractors working on a county road project, the realignment of Saratoga Way, had failed to water the site until she complained to Supervisor Helen Baumann.

Baumann said the county is working to prevent such lapses. She said contractors walk a fine line: They must use enough water to prevent dust, but not so much as to cause runoff. Each can result in fines.

John Hidahl, president of the El Dorado Hills Incorporation Committee, asked whether fines collected for construction-dust and other asbestos-related violations would be placed in a risk-management fund to cover the cost of potential lawsuits. Teachers who might have been exposed to naturally occurring asbestos over the years at Oak Ridge High School could sue if they experience health problems, he said.

Tom Bruen, air district counsel, said, "In terms of (naturally occurring asbestos), I don't see a situation that gives rise to litigation for the county. It is a naturally occurring substance."

A second community meeting is set for 7 p.m. Tuesday in the El Dorado Hills Community Services District Pavilion, 1021 Harvard Way, El Dorado Hills.

WHAT'S NEXT

PUBLIC HEARING

The Air Quality Management District Board will hold a hearing to consider new rules on construction dust and asbestos hazard mitigation.

When: 9 a.m. Tuesday.

Where: Board of Supervisors meeting room, 330 Fair Lane, Building A, Placerville.

COMMUNITY MEETING

County Supervisors Helen Baumann and Rusty Dupray will hold a community meeting to provide information and answer questions about naturally occurring asbestos.

When: 7 p.m. Tuesday.

Where: El Dorado Hills Community Services District Pavilion, 1021 Harvard Way, El Dorado Hills.

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