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U.S. Cites Emergency in Asbestos-Poisoned Town

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The Environmental Protection Agency declared a public health emergency on Wednesday in and near Libby, Mont., where over the course of decades asbestos contamination in a vermiculite mine has left hundreds of people dead or sickened from lung diseases.

It was the first health emergency ever declared under the Superfund law, the 1980 statute that governs sites contaminated or threatened by hazardous substances. The Libby site has been designated a Superfund priority since 2002.

A spokeswoman for the E.P.A. said that in anticipation of the declaration, the Department of Health and Human Services had agreed to make $6 million available to the Lincoln County Health Clinic, which provides care to residents of the area, to finance treatment of people with asbestos-related conditions. She said the declaration also authorized the environmental agency to remove vermiculite, whose uses include insulating, from buildings there.

In addition, she said, the agency will begin an effort to inform Americans generally about the risks of insulation made from vermiculite, a natural silicate mineral that forms in flakes. She said that it was not known how many homes nationally contained asbestos-contaminated vermiculite but that estimates ran into the tens of millions.

Vermiculite flakes puff up like popcorn when heated. Because the mineral is chemically inert, fire-resistant, lightweight and odorless, it was once widely used in insulation that was typically poured loosely between attic floor joists or between wall studs.

The Libby mine, originally operated by the Zonolite Company, at one time provided 80 percent of the nation’s vermiculite insulation, according to the E.P.A. W.R. Grace & Company bought the mine in 1963 and, according to the agency, sold vermiculite insulation from there until 1983.

Grace closed the mine in 1990. The company and three of its former executives were acquitted in federal court last month of charges that they had knowingly contaminated Libby with asbestos and then conspired to cover up the deed.

Grace agreed last year to pay the federal government $250 million for cleanup efforts around the mining site. At least 200 people have died of asbestos-related diseases, with hundreds more sickened, in and around Libby, a town of about 2,600 people in Montana’s northwestern corner.

The E.P.A. offers information on dealing with vermiculite insulation at http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/18/science/earth/18libby.html?ref=science&pagewanted=all...
The agency recommends that homeowners who have vermiculite insulation assume that it is asbestos-contaminated.