

*Libby Area Technical Assistant Group, Inc.
PO Box 53
Libby, MT 59923*

Ms. Rebecca Thomas
Remedial Project Manager
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
1595 Wynkoop Street
Denver, CO 80202-1129

Date: 4/28/14 Subject: Proposed Changes to Cleanup Involving Visible Vermiculite

Dear Ms. Thomas,

The Libby Area Technical Assistance Group (TAG) hereby expresses our dissatisfaction with the proposed changes to soil cleanups involving visible vermiculite and trace concentrations (0.2% or less) of Libby amphibole asbestos (LA). Based on what we learned at the TAG meeting on April 15, 2014, we are not convinced that there is a driving need to make the change now. Making the proposed changes now will increase public health risks prior to a more robust decision-making process leading up to the Record of Decision (ROD) later this year. Should that decision-making process lead to yet more changes in protocols, it can create more hassles to residents and increased project costs associated with remediation to a property. Most importantly perhaps, frequent changes to the remediation protocols presents a mixed and confusing message to the broader public that may foster distrust and influence behavior in how people respond to visible vermiculite.

It is our understanding that you are developing plans, not yet finalized, to not remediate soils with trace concentrations of LA or visible vermiculite that is non-detect for LA. The TAG strongly feels that any type of soil should be remediated if Libby Amphibole (LA) is found at levels that could, under certain conceivable circumstances, create an unacceptable public health risk.

The TAG is concerned that this action is being undertaken at this time because the EPA is anticipating outcomes for the background assessment and risk assessment. Such a decision is premature. We feel a fully vetted risk assessment, that has undergone public review, is needed to support the kind of change the agency is now considering. As discussed with you at our meeting last Tuesday (April 15, 2014), we have ongoing concerns with results presented by EPA on the background study, and expect to have more detailed comments by next month. In particular, we seek resolution of a wide discrepancy in findings between EPA's recent background study and that conducted by the U.S. Geologic Survey,¹ which concluded:

"The layers of sediment containing LA [in the Libby area] are a few centimeters thick and are covered by at least 15 meters of material. If pervasive, they would only be exposed at the land surface in the faces of the bluffs. A sample of Pleistocene alluvial gravel underlying a field near Libby contained LA. It is uncertain whether the LA was natural origin or was a product of mining."

¹ Langer, W.H., Van Gosen, B.S., Meeker, G.P., Adams, D.T., and Hoefen, T.M., 2010. The dispersion of fibrous amphiboles by glacial processes in the area surrounding Libby, Montana, USA, *Environ Earth Sci*, 18 Nov. 2010.

We are particularly concerned that years of effort in communicating to the public on the need to report visible vermiculate and avoid exposure will be irreparably damaged by a hasty decision on this issue. Once it becomes known that the EPA is not consistently responding to visible vermiculite, people may stop reporting it. Flip-flopping on basic communications such as this runs a very real risk of losing faith with the public because it creates a sense that the agency is unsure and inconsistent in what it is talking about and doing. Accordingly, a change of this magnitude should only occur if supported by clear and compelling evidence, such as a robust risk assessment vetted through peer and public review.

Absent any recognized and compelling need to make the proposed change to soil cleanups involving visible vermiculite now, and absent any clear and compelling scientific information that exposure to trace asbestos in soil does not pose an unacceptable risk, we urge the EPA to stay consistent with existing plans and messages through this construction season. Similarly, we urge you to avoid further delays in completing a risk assessment being caused by industry groups having vested interests in delaying the inevitable when it comes to responding to the public health risks caused by asbestos mismanagement in the past.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Noble". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Michael" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Noble".

Mike Noble

President

Libby Area Technical Assistance Group

C: Nick Raines, Asbestos Resource Program Manager. Lincoln County Environmental Health