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Judith Ayres  
Regional Administrator  
U.S. EPA  
215 Praumont Street  
San Francisco, CA

FEB 25 1995

Dear Ms. Ayres:

After reviewing the draft work plan for the performance of the Remedial Investigations/Feasibility Study at the Atlas/Coalings Asbestos Mine sites in Fresno County, California, we have the following comments.

General Comments

From our meeting with Harry Seraydarian and Richard Hartyn on November 13, 1994, we understood that EPA was largely persuaded from its examination of information gathered during preparation of the Remedial Action Management Plan for the asbestos mine sites that any remedial actions taken at these sites could be expected to have only a negligible impact on the regional problem of the introduction of asbestos fibers into the California Aqueduct through the Arroyo Pasajero. We also understood that EPA felt constrained to conduct further site investigations to confirm this supposition, but that such investigations would be confined to estimating the relative contribution of asbestos fibers from the Los Banos Creek watershed from the mine sites on the basis of a comprehensive examination of existing regional data in comparison with new site-specific measurements. The Remedial Investigations/Feasibility Study (RI/FS) document provided for our review, however, outlines a much more ambitious and costly plan of actions. Indeed, the ultimate thrust of the RI/FS appears to be more in the nature of an areawide planning process under section 303 of the Clean Water Act than it does a site investigation under CERCLA. Naturally, the Bureau is concerned about the scope of its potential financial liability from such an expansive use of Superfund monies.

The Atlas and Coalings Mines are the only sites currently on the National Priority List (NPL). These are the only sites where Superfund monies are appropriately spent. Any "areawide study" that your office chooses to do, should come out of EPA's funding base and not an "Industry Taxed" money source.

In addition to this concern, we also have doubts about the potential efficacy of various actions planned and thus anticipate that the Federal Government may incur needless expenses if the plan of action is implemented without modifications.

The Atlas and Coalings mines are situated in a naturally occurring serpentine orebody approximately 14 miles long and 4 miles wide. This orebody has been eroding for thousands of years. As a result, asbestos-laden sediments are extensively present in the stream channels and flood plains of the Arroyo Pasajero and are readily transported to the California Aqueduct during high water periods. Previous studies by the California Department of Water Resources, the California Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board, and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation all support the conclusion that effective prevention of the introduction of asbestos fibers into the California Aqueduct must be based on off-site control measures. Site-specific control measures can only partially contribute to a reduction in the sedimentation problem, and such measures are relatively expensive. With these considerations in mind, the formulation of any plan for site-specific study should be approached with cost efficiency as a paramount guiding principle.

### Specific Comments

- p. 21 Subtask 2-1. Wasn't a literature review already done for the RAMP study that can be utilized in this next study phase?
- p. 23 Water samples taken only during the last half of the runoff season may not adequately describe the actual movement of sediment and asbestos in streamflows since earlier fall and winter storms flush the majority of sediments and asbestos into the stream system. Thus, the sampling scheme as designed will underestimate actual sediment movements from both disturbed and undisturbed watershed areas. Without sampling for the whole runoff period it will not be possible to determine the actual average sediment yield for both disturbed and undisturbed areas.
- p. 23 Task 3. An extensive field sampling plan has been proposed in the draft work plan. A more economical alternative is available through the use of modeling based on existing topographic and hydrologic data. The Beaver Service Center of the Bureau has several hydrology design and analysis computer programs available that could be used to model watershed impacts in the Snake Creek or Pine Creek drainages. These programs include: (1) flood routing and dam breach analysis; (2) Universal Soil Loss Equation (USLE); and (3) curve-number runoff methodology.
- p. 25 The closest stream bed and stream sampling site to the tailings area is about 1 1/2 miles downstream. If it is really an objective to describe movement off the tailings area, a sampling site should be established directly below the tailings area where the majority of the drainage area is covered by the tailings, rather than only a small part of the drainage area, as in the case by having the sampling site 1 1/2 miles below the tailings.
- p. 30-31 The sampling scheme as designed has a high probability of failure due to the objective of sampling during storm events. The roads are very likely to be impassable during storms and helicopter flights during these storms would be very risky.

- p. 31 The sampling of Jalacitoa, Zapata, Chico, and Wortham Creeks will not provide a valid background comparison to compare with accelerated erosion from the Atlas Mine area because the soil mineralogy of the two areas is different. The asbestos ore body is only in the northern part of the Los Gatos watershed, thus sampling of streams in the southern part of the watershed will not describe the background asbestos levels, i.e., the asbestos does not occur in the southern part at the same levels as it does in the asbestos ore body area.
- p. 35 The assumption that stream velocities are high enough to keep asbestos-laden sediment and free asbestos fibers in suspension is not valid and we feel that a simple visual inspection of the drainages will demonstrate this, because asbestos fibers can be seen deposited in and along stream channels throughout the area. Sediment transport is a process whereby the particles move a distance and then are redeposited--sometimes in locations which will not be flushed for relatively long periods of time. It has been demonstrated many times with sediment delivery ratio curves that all the sediment detached within a watershed does not get carried from the watershed.
- p. 37 Subtask 4-1. The Risk Assessment need not "evaluate the relative magnitude and extent of waterborne asbestos in areas other than the California Aqueduct," i.e., other California water sources whose drainages may contain serpentine soils.
- p. 37 Subtask 4. The outside expert should determine a "basic" level to which mitigation efforts will be geared.
- p. 37 Subtask 4-2. This task appears to be critical. If the information gathered does not support a health hazard, the study should be stopped. This task should be done and a decision made before any on-the-ground sampling occurs.
- p. 38 ~~Why will EPA be meeting with the State to review the technical memorandum? The Bureau should meet with EPA prior to the initiation of any other meetings.~~
- p. 31 Task 4. A task force group as described in the draft work plan would not be the appropriate forum for determining allocations of project costs. Commitments of funding to the Bureau for a project such as this can only come through our Washington Office. Any discussions concerning this type of funding request can happen only between the Environmental Protection Agency as the designated Superfund agency and the Bureau's Washington Office.

Also, a goal of the proposed Task Force "Management Committee" is to address legal and liability concerns. The Bureau addresses legal and liability concerns with Department of Interior solicitors only. This is an area of concern we prefer to discuss with our legal staff and not in the forum of a task force. The proposed Management Committee is to address the involvement of potentially

responsible parties. This is another area which should not be addressed by a task force group. Negotiations and discussions should occur between EPA and the party in question.

We also feel obligated to point out that, under the President's current deficit reduction goals, as Federal employees we must look for cost effective methods of getting the job done. It appears the monthly task force committee meetings are inconsistent with these goals and a luxury that travel reductions will not allow within our agency.

In reference to task force membership/community relations, we are uncertain how the affected county is meant to be brought into the process. It appears to be more appropriate for public meetings to be held which include the local citizens and would be better located in the Colusa or Yuba areas, and not in the San Francisco area.

In conclusion, we recommend the following occur:

1. Discontinue further analysis and study and use modeling in its place.
2. Do not establish an "Interagency Task Force," but rather a Technical Advisory Committee, if technical guidance is deemed necessary to determine the relative contribution of asbestos from the Atlas Mine site.
3. Consider the DNR and BOR's more practical viewpoint. To effect loading reductions, site enclosures at appropriate off-site locations.

As you can see, we have considerable concerns as to the way the EIS/FS is being prepared at this time. Please contact Ms. Lois Payne of my staff to schedule a meeting to address solutions to these concerns, as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

*Ed Haxley*

Ed Haxley  
State Director

cc:

*D.M. Battersfield*

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