

## Residents have more questions than scientists have answers

By Wil Morat  
Staff writer

A scientist told El Dorado Hills residents that samples taken by the Environmental Protection Agency in 2004 contained "no asbestos" on Wednesday night. Not everyone in attendance believed him.

Drew Van Orden, a senior scientist with R.J. Lee Group, Inc. addressed a crowd gathered at the EDH Community Services District to hear details about his company's analysis of the EPA study. Van Orden spewed out names and numbers in a lengthy slide presentation during which he claimed that none of the samples contained naturally occurring asbestos.

"We're not saying there's no asbestos in EDH," Van Orden said. "We're just saying the samples from the EPA didn't have them."

Van Orden described mathematical differences in shape, size and dimensions between asbestos and other fibers, or cleavage fragments, that he claims the EPA incorrectly categorized as NOA.

"Based on chemistry, at least 63 percent of the fibers can't be asbestos. The remaining 37 percent can't be due to size and dimensions," Van Orden said.

Jennifer Bailey, an industrial hygienist with Network Environmental Systems in Folsom, was hired by the CSD to conduct separate tests on the softball fields. Her findings were sim-

ilar to what the R.J. Lee Group claims, that many fibers didn't match the definition of asbestos.

"Most of the asbestos fibers we observed were long," Bailey said. "We generally reported low concentrations of asbestos." NES conducted an air sampling study in September and November of 2005, but Bailey cautioned against making too many comparisons to the EPA study.

"We weren't trying to recreate the EPA study," Bailey said. "Background air sampling suggests there might be NOA in the air around EDH. It might be something that would need to be further evaluated."

The R.J. Lee Group faced

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additional scrutiny due to their work for W.R. Grace & Co., a mining company in Libby, Montana, where many local residents exhibited signs of asbestos-related diseases. R.J. Lee defended the mining company claiming that most of the fibers were cleavage fragments or non-toxic. W.R. Grace & Co. has faced civil lawsuits and was ordered to pay millions in EPA-related cleanup of the site.

When the meeting opened up for questions and answers, many residents were prepared to challenge Van Orden's statements.

Chris Anaya lives in EDH and asked several questions of Van Orden. Anaya probed the scientist for reasons why he was making some of the same distinctions

between asbestos fibers and non-asbestos fibers based on dimension and size as they did in the Libby, Montana case.

"It just shows the flaws in sampling," Anaya said. "Regulations haven't caught up with the science." Anaya had a copy of a letter sent by W.R. Grace & Co. that used the same argument over the definition of asbestos and cleavage fragments.

Van Orden referred to a definition made by the National Institute of Standards and Technology as their basis for defining NOA.

Dan Meer, the chief of response planning and assessment with the EPA, said using these definitions is the reason for disagreement.

"What [the EPA] did was very

carefully count structures that match the human health definition used to assess risk management. All the human health studies use these [standards]," Meer said.

Meer said the argument over definition isn't a new dispute.

"These are the exact same arguments they used in the W.R. Grace case in Libby, Montana," Meer said. "The cleavage fragment issue is a ruse. There are no studies that demonstrate cleavage fragments are not toxic."

Van Orden said he's not a "toxicologist" and that all he can do is define what is asbestos and what isn't. He also said there are no studies that show cleavage fragments are harmful.

Meer, like many EDH residents,

isn't buying the R.J. Lee argument.

"There are 200 dead and 1,500 sick in a town of 12,000 in Libby, Montana," Meer said. "It's like you can talk to a scientist who works for a tobacco company. They swear up and down that second hand smoke doesn't cause cancer. It's very analogous to that argument."

One EDH resident in attendance wasn't happy with any explanation given. George Gamschow said that without medical studies on the health effects of NOA, everything is just speculation.

"What it sounds like is this is defending a tort issue and not [dealing with] the health effects. I see a waste of money, plain and simple," Gamschow said. "It made

me mad, I don't like bad science."

Bailey, who received less badgering from the crowd than Van Orden did, alluded to the need for more research on the effects of any size or type of NOA.

"I'd like to see more toxicology tests on people working in areas where NOA occurs, like construction workers who move earth on a regular basis," Bailey said.

Several nationally recognized experts have submitted opinions stating the R.J. Lee study was accurate. Another peer review is being sought by the EDC Superintendent of Schools Vicki Barber in order to dispel the notion that the R.J. Lee analysis was an "industry study."

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