

✓ Hazardous materials 3-24-88 GT

Public Health

Asbestos Contained in Debris

MYRTLE Street residents were lucky the fire at the old Union Ice Co. Plant last November did little damage to their property, but they may have been exposed to something even more lethal — asbestos.

Fire Marshall George Lopes confirmed Tuesday that the department has known for "probably a month" that asbestos was used in asphalt floor tiles, roofing paper and plaster walls in the plant. He said the County Health Department is planning to oversee removal of the asbestos-laden materials, but asbestos is still present in debris sitting in the lot near the gutted plant.

Lopes isn't worried that the materials pose a health hazard.

"Environmental Health at the county is aware of it. I guess it's not (hazardous) or they would have done something about it," he said. "It's really a little out of our realm of responsibility, so I don't know."

Lopes said the type of asbestos used was "non-friable." Non-friable, or non-flaking asbestos is generally considered safe because the particles need to flake off and become airborne before they can enter the body.

But Heather Maurer, executive director of the national Asbestos Victims of America, which has its headquarters in Soquel, thinks the friable and non-friable categories are deceptive. According to Maurer, non-friable asbestos can become friable when it's burned or broken.

"What we're concerned about is two things: one, the firepeople get extremely exposed to asbestos, and they know it; and two, when the fire's over and the debris sits around in piles what you have is that the agents that bind the asbestos are burned away in some cases, so you're left with

Ice Plant wreckage holds asbestos, but hazard is debated

the raw mineral, which is definitely friable," she said.

Once they're absorbed, asbestos fibers collect in the body and cause various diseases including lung and esophagus cancers, mesothelioma (a cancer of the lining of the lungs and abdominal cavity), and asbestosis (scarring of the lung tissue that makes breathing increasingly difficult), Maurer said.

Maurer's assessment of the risk seems to be backed up by an Environmental Protection Agency requirement that it be notified when a commercial or public building in which asbestos has been used is demolished or extensively remodeled. Terry Wilson, a spokesman for the EPA's San Francisco office, acknowledged that asbestos particles could be released when such a building is demolished.

"The asbestos is not of a type I'd consider a high hazard, not in the form that it's in," said Ilse Kolbus, hazardous materials program manager for the county. "Now if it's crushed or a lot of activity happens where materials are trampled or pulverized it could be." Kolbus added that no asbestos particles were found in dust samples from the debris piles.

Kolbus said she was under the impression that plans to haul the debris were underway and that the area had been fenced to keep people away from the debris and the burned building, which poses a safety hazard in itself. She said she learned Tuesday that the area wasn't fenced and the

debris hadn't been removed. Unable to reach the facility's owner, she called the insurer, which she said agreed to post a security guard until a fence could be installed.

Kolbus also sent letters to the owner and insurer demanding they sign a contract for the debris removal or fence the site within 10 days.

Mark Fratkin, president of Adjusters Associates, and a representative of property owner Saul Weingarten, said Weingarten "is extremely concerned about the problem." He said the area should be fenced by Thursday.

Fratkin said his office had received bids for demolition and removal by Christmas, but cleanup was delayed when he found out the debris had to be tested for asbestos and a special permit would be needed to do the work. He said his office hired a tester but was told that a report had already been done some time ago when some equipment was to be removed.

After trying unsuccessfully to locate the report for "four or five weeks," Fratkin ordered a new report and when it arrived a month later, put the job out to bid. Two of four bids have arrived in the last week. Fratkin hopes the debris will be moved out "sometime next week."

"I have to assure you that if (fencing) had been requested, it would have been done long ago and the city has certainly been aware of what's going on because they are the ones who've been in contact with me," said Fratkin.

Maurer urged people who think they may have been exposed to asbestos or who want more information about it to call the Asbestos Victims of America at 476-3646. •

—Chela Zabin