

Sumas Mountain / Swift Creek Asbestos Cluster Investigation

2013 Summary



This summary of our 2013 report (<http://www.doh.wa.gov/Documents/Pubs/334-331.pdf>) investigates health effects from possible exposure to naturally occurring asbestos in the Swift Creek and Sumas River drainage area located in Whatcom County. This study follows up on epidemiological cluster investigations conducted in 2008 and 2010.

The goal of this investigation was to assess the rate of lung and bronchial cancer, mesothelioma, and asbestosis among people living in the study area compared to rates for Washington State and Whatcom County using additional years of data. While mesothelioma and asbestosis are relatively rare and specifically linked to asbestos exposure, lung and bronchial cancer is more common and is associated with numerous factors, especially smoking. We reasoned that the people living in the study area are more likely to be exposed to asbestos than other Washington residents and therefore, might experience a higher rate of asbestosis or asbestos related cancer (such as cancer of the lung and bronchus, and mesothelioma).

Investigation

The number of people diagnosed with lung and bronchial cancer and mesothelioma from 1992-2011 was obtained from the Washington State Cancer Registry. The number of people diagnosed with asbestosis from 2003-2011 was obtained from the Comprehensive Hospital Abstract Reporting System. These data were adjusted to account for differences in the age distribution of the populations. The adjustment was necessary since the rate of these diseases increases with age. The rates of asbestos-related cancers and asbestosis in the study area were compared to rates for Whatcom County and Washington State.

Conclusion

The results of this investigation suggest that the naturally occurring asbestos in the Swift Creek and Sumas River study area are not contributing to an increase in the occurrence of lung and bronchial cancer, mesothelioma, or asbestosis among the people living in the area. However, these conclusions are based on available data and current investigation methods, both of which have limitations (see report for more information). Because of these limitations and general asbestos health hazards, the Department of Health continues to recommend that people reduce or eliminate their exposure to naturally occurring asbestos associated with Swift Creek and the Sumas River. For more information, check the Sumas River and Swift Creek advisories at <http://www.doh.wa.gov/DataandStatisticalReports/EnvironmentalHealth/SiteAssessments.aspx#Whatcom>.