April 2003

HAZARDOUS MATERIALS

EPA's Cleanup of Asbestos in Libby, Montana, and Related Actions to Address Asbestos-Contaminated Materials

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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-03-469, a report to the Honorable Denny Rehberg, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Between 1979 and 1998, the number of deaths in Libby, Montana from asbestosis—a lung disease that progressively restricts breathing and can be fatal—was 40 to 80 times higher than the average for the United States. Vermiculite ore—containing high concentrations of asbestos—was mined at Libby between 1923 and 1990, and accounted for most of the world's vermiculite. Mining, processing, or any disturbance of the contaminated vermiculite releases asbestos fibers into the air, which can lead to respiratory illnesses, including asbestosis. When processed, the vermiculite is used in insulation, fireproofing materials, garden materials, and other products. GAO reviewed the history of the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) involvement in Libby prior to the agency's initiation of cleanup actions in 1999, the status and costs of EPA's cleanup in Libby, and other actions EPA and other federal agencies are taking to address exposure to asbestos-contaminated materials.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-469.

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact John Stephenson at (202) 512-3841 or stephensonj@gao.gov.

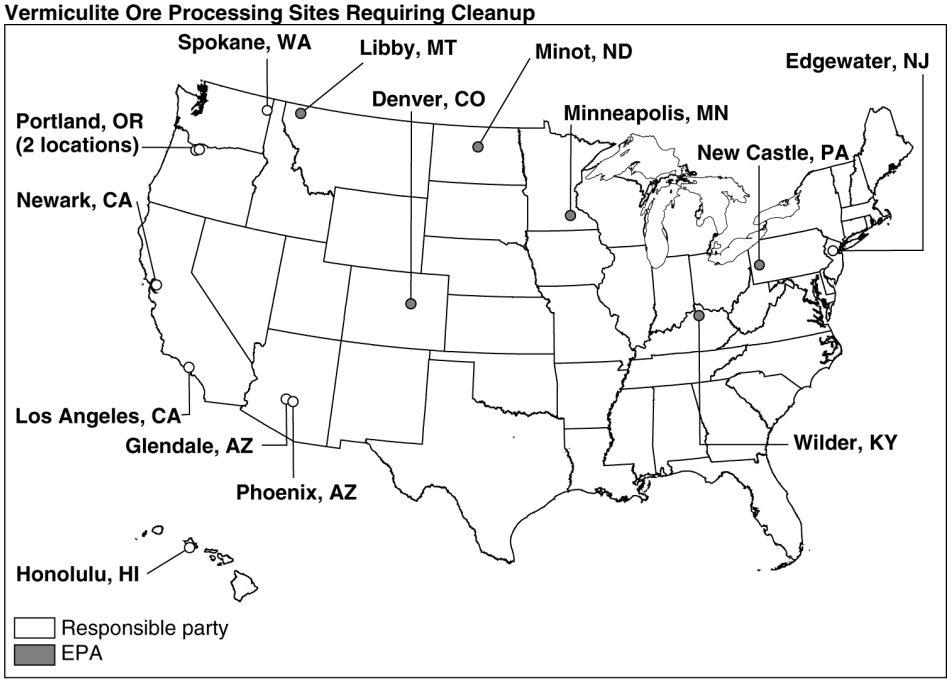
What GAO Found

EPA has had a long track record investigating and cleaning up asbestos contamination at Libby, Montana. As far back as 1982, EPA reported that Libby vermiculite ore processed to remove impurities remained contaminated with asbestos. Nonetheless, EPA misjudged the extent of contamination at Libby and focused instead on higher-priority asbestos contamination issues at other locations. Although EPA had received citizen complaints about potential health risks with this vermiculite ore since 1992, it did not initiate an extensive investigation until after the media reported about health problems in Libby in 1999.

Cleanup at Libby, begun in 2000, is expected to continue through 2007 and cost at least $179 million. Through 2002, EPA spent $79 million on cleaning commercial, residential, and public properties in Libby. Cleanup included sampling analyses, soil excavation and disposal, property restoration, and medical testing. EPA plans to spend another $100 million to complete cleanup activities at these properties and at the Libby mine.

While the Libby cleanup continues, EPA and agencies within the Departments of Labor and of Health and Human Services have activities addressing potential exposure to substances contaminated with asbestos. For example, EPA and responsible parties are conducting cleanup at 14 sites that received Libby vermiculite ore, in addition to Libby, as shown below.

Vermiculite Ore Processing Sites Requiring Cleanup



Source: EPA (data) and GAO (analysis).