

The Case of Libby, MT and Asbestos

By Eva Bauer, 2016 Summer Intern

Libby, Montana, a small town in northwestern Montana, is home to the nation's worst environmental disaster as reported by the Environmental Protection Agency.¹ Nothing was known about the horrific health effects residents of Libby were suffering from until in 1999 – 90 years after mining began in the town. At that time, a [reporter](#) from the Seattle Post-Intelligencer released an article, "Uncivil Action: A Town Left to Die", which sparked national attention from the public. It also caught the attention of various organizations including the EPA².

In 1919, a company began mining vermiculite in Libby, which contained asbestos fibers. In the years soon after, employees reported health problems such as lung disease.³ In 1963, W.R. Grace & Company acquired the mining operation with knowledge that past employees had health complications, that vermiculite has asbestos fibers in it and that there was a health hazard. Even with this knowledge, W.R. Grace & Company did not issue a warning to employees about these risks and mining continued for years.⁴ Since that time, hundreds of residents from Libby have suffered and died and almost two thousand are currently suffering due to the constant exposure they endured⁵.

Miners, their families and the entire Libby community have been exposed to dangerous asbestos fibers for years. Miners were directly exposed, but they also brought home fibers on their clothes, hair and skin that endanger their families.⁶ Additionally, vermiculite with asbestos fibers spread to backyards, gardens and local playgrounds. This put asbestos in places where many children and families spent much of their time, leading to higher exposures in vulnerable populations.⁷

To this day, there are 15 new cases of asbestosis, lung cancer or mesothelioma diagnosed in Libby, monthly.⁸ Although efforts to control and reduce asbestos exposure have been taken, Libby is still plagued with this horrible toxin. Asbestosis mortality in Libby was found to be between 40 and 80 times higher than expected. Cancer mortality was also 1.2 times higher than in Montana and 1.3 times higher than in the United States.⁹

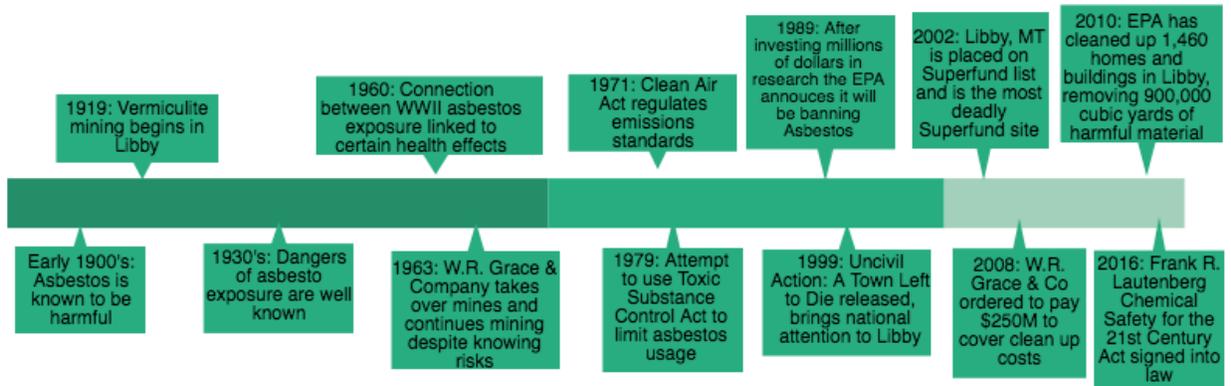
Addressing the harmful effects of asbestos in Libby has been a long and ongoing process. In 2008, W.R. Grace & Company was ordered to pay \$250 million to help cover the cleanup efforts in Libby. By 2010, the EPA had remediated 1,460 businesses and houses, about 900,000 cubic yards of material, containing asbestos fibers. Preventative methods, including education to recognize asbestos, have been implemented to speed reporting and remediation.¹⁰ Although progress has been made, more is needed.

Due to the proven dangers of asbestos, many countries have moved to reduce, regulate and ban its use.¹¹ Multiple interest groups have been pushing for stronger US regulation since asbestos was recognized by OSHA in the early 1970s.¹² Even though there is clear science on the health effects caused by asbestos exposure, the EPA could adequately regulate it under the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA). In June 2016, [the Frank R. Lautenberg Chemical Safety for the](#)

[21st Century Act](#) was signed into law, which allows for revised regulation of harmful chemicals¹³. A human and environmental tragedy occurred in Libby. Unfortunately, this is just one example of the deadly effects this human made, preventable exposure has had on human health.

History is drawn from preceding and additional sources^{14,15}.

History of Asbestos in Libby



This document is student work. CHE makes no claim that all the information has been verified.

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- 3 The Mesothelioma Center. Libby. <http://www.asbestos.com/jobsites/libby/> , 7/1/2016
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