

Chemicals

Sen. Casey's Office Vows EPA Outreach Over Pennsylvania Asbestos Site

Staff for Sen. Bob Casey (D-Pa.) plan to reach out to the Environmental Protection Agency to press constituent concerns over ongoing health risks posed by asbestos near former Superfund sites in Ambler, Pa., Casey's spokesman told Bloomberg BNA on Feb. 26.

That pledge follows a Feb. 23 meeting on Capitol Hill between Casey's staff and Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization President Linda Reinstein.

"Members of Senator Casey's staff both in Pennsylvania and D.C. have met with constituents who have concerns about the Ambler site," Casey spokesman John Rizzo told Bloomberg BNA. "The health and safety of his constituents is Senator Casey's top priority."

The EPA added the Ambler Asbestos Piles Superfund Site to its National Priorities List in 1986 and completed cleanup just over seven years later. The agency then removed the site from the NPL in 1996, declaring it remediated. But asbestos advocates say the set of minerals still lingers on sites adjacent to the former Superfund site. Asbestos continues to pose a substantial threat to the surrounding community, Reinstein told Bloomberg BNA in interviews over recent days.

Asbestos is a carcinogen that causes mesothelioma, asbestosis and other serious, potentially fatal illnesses.

Asbestos Advocate Urges EPA Action. The EPA did not respond to several Bloomberg BNA requests for comment. Reinstein, who is a mesothelioma widow, said she has been in regular communication with the EPA over recent months, including multiple conference calls. The agency must act immediately to safeguard the community, said Reinstein but did not prescribe a precise course of action.

"I think they should take action. They should recognize the degree of risk in this residential area, regain authority over the site, and take action to protect public health," Reinstein said, adding that the agency should hold private parties culpable. "For me personally, the EPA should have drawn a wider ring and treated the commercial area around the Superfund site. That's the important part."

The Ambler site is 25 acres in size and comprised of three asbestos waste piles, alongside several filter bed

lagoons, the EPA says. Commercial and residential areas border the site. Private companies continue to dump waste that contained asbestos on the site through 1974, according to the EPA.

No GAO Involvement to Date. Reinstein sent a letter to Sens. Casey and Pat Toomey (R-Pa.) in September 2015, urging the lawmakers to pressure the Government Accountability Office to craft a report on the ongoing hazards. That effort failed to spur GAO action, according to an e-mail from GAO spokesman Chuck Young on Feb. 25.

"We don't have any current work on that site so we are not able to offer any comment at this point," Young said.

Reinstein said a GAO report on the ongoing hazards at an asbestos site in Libby, Mont., detailed an accurate review of asbestos risks. The EPA released a final remediation plan for that site in February (26 DEN A-12, 2/9/16).

Toomey's office didn't respond to repeated Bloomberg BNA requests for comment.

Meanwhile, a staffer for Senate Environment and Public Works ranking member Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), told an ADAO event on Feb. 23 there are numerous hazardous waste sites nationwide that aren't designated Superfund sites, despite posing comparable risk.

The Ambler borough contains another asbestos Superfund site dubbed the BoRit Asbestos Superfund Site. The EPA placed that site on the NPL in 2009.

ADAO Presses Ambler at Hill Briefing. Reinstein led her organization's ninth congressional briefing on Feb. 23, at which point she called for an asbestos ban as part of a potential Toxic Substances Control Act update this Congress (36 DEN A-16, 2/24/16).

Alongside Reinstein, Ambler resident and mesothelioma widow Marilyn Amento decried federal inaction in Ambler.

"Ambler has been ignored for decades. Corporations must not be allowed to ravage the land in our neighborhoods and then pick up and leave with no responsibility for cleanup," said Amento at the event. "Hundreds of people in Ambler died from asbestos-related diseases."

Reinstein and Amento toured the Ambler vicinity in June 2015, where they said they discovered a laundry list of hazards adjacent to the former Ambler Superfund site. Crumbled concrete and other building materials littered the ground, and a chain-link fence stood open and in need of repair, Reinstein said, adding that she

obtained a sample composite of suspicious debris that ultimately tested out at 60 percent Chrysolite asbestos.

The EPA later returned and discovered composites containing 20 percent asbestos, said Reinstein.

“I felt at that time it would be my science vs. their science, so I decided to reach out congressionally,” Reinstein said on Feb. 29. “I expect there to be pushback.”

Resembling a Developing Country. Reinstein said the area appeared derelict.

“I’ve seen photographs of developing countries where asbestos-contaminated debris is discarded in

open area ... [Ambler] looks like a war zone,” Reinstein said. “The time is now for Congress to recognize that they need to contribute the time, attention and dollars to clean up this man-made disaster.”

A staffer for Rep. Brendan Boyle (D-Pa.), who represents Ambler, did not respond for a Bloomberg BNA request for comment.

BY BRIAN DABBS

To contact the reporter on this story: Brian Dabbs at bdabbs@bna.com

To contact the editor responsible for this story: Larry Pearl at lpearl@bna.com

To request permission to reuse or share this document, please contact permissions@bna.com. In your request, be sure to include the following information: (1) your name, company, mailing address, email and telephone number; (2) name of the document and/or a link to the document PDF; (3) reason for request (what you want to do with the document); and (4) the approximate number of copies to be made or URL address (if posting to a website).