

Iron Range Calls For Action On Mesothelioma

Lee Bloomquist Duluth News Tribune
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MOUNTAIN IRON — Joe Scholar has had cancer twice.

But he has only one concern.

“All I want to do is save the children of the Range,” said Scholar, 84, of Virginia, a former LTV Steel Mining Co. employee. “Especially the ones in Virginia that have to drink water that has tailings in it and breathe the air that comes into Virginia from U.S. Steel and Eveleth [United] Taconite.”

Scholar and about a half-dozen other Iron Range residents gave the state Department of Health and about a dozen lawmakers a piece of their minds Thursday night during a public meeting about mesothelioma in front of about 160 people at Mountain Iron Community Center.

Miners, their wives and retirees say exposure to iron ore dust and asbestos has for years been a concern on the Range.

However, it never has been determined whether 58 miners who, since 2003, have died of mesothelioma, a type of cancer, developed it from commercial asbestos, iron ore dust or other sources.

To a person, Iron Rangers say they want action.

“Commissioner [Dianne] Mandernach, will you ask the governor for a special session and get some funding and get this rolling?” asked Robert Bassing, a miner at U.S. Steel’s Minntac Mine in Mountain Iron. “We have to quit this political stuff and work together.”

Nine DFL lawmakers, eight from the Iron Range, last week called for Mandernach’s resignation as state health commissioner after it was discovered that the department delayed for a year announcing that an additional 35 miners died from mesothelioma.

Mesothelioma is a rare form of cancer that affects the lining of the lungs and abdomen. It is seen almost exclusively in people who have been exposed to asbestos. It generally takes 20 to 50 years to develop.

By the time it’s discovered, it’s often fatal.

Mandernach, a Moose Lake native, reiterated Thursday that it was a mistake not releasing the information. She said the department planned three studies on the issue and pledged to come back in six months for a public meeting to update residents.

“I am keenly aware of the frustration on the Range,” Mandernach said. “In listening to your stories and frustrations, I apologize. Every commissioner since the 1980s has dealt with the issue.”

Sen. Dave Tomassoni of Chisholm said Iron Range residents have lost confidence in the department and said an independent group should perform future studies. “I’m hoping that somewhere along the way, if we find an independent study, that you will cooperate,” Tomassoni said.

Mary Stodola of Hoyt Lakes said her husband, a former LTV worker, has been diagnosed with mesothelioma. “The guys would come home black,” Stodola said. “The little masks they gave the men

and coveralls they wore didn't protect the men. It's too late for us, but it's not too late for our children and grandchildren to have a better life."

Former state Rep. Joe Begich of Eveleth said he worked more than 30 years at a taconite plant. He called the delay in releasing information a "cover-up."

"What I'm saying to the commissioner is shame, shame on you for not protecting lives. It's wrong what the administration is doing."

Dave Trach, director of a 1,200-member steelworkers' retiree group and former LTV Steel Mining Co. employee, said 480 LTV miners have been screened for health issues since 1999.

Of the 480, 286 have some type of health problems linked to asbestos-like fibers, Trach said.

Trach said miners were never told about asbestos products used in the mines.

"I've been terribly frustrated since 1999 and it seems like I've been butting my head against the wall. I hope this starts something."

In 2003, the state Department of Health — in a study of 72,000 miners — identified 17 who had worked in the mines between the 1930s and 1982 and developed the disease between 1988 and 1996. Of the 17, 14 had significant exposure to commercial asbestos, such as brake linings, plumbing, furnaces or boilers, the department said. One of the 17 was potentially exposed to high amounts of mineral dust.

The department concluded that exposure to commercial asbestos in the mining industry — not fibers in the ore — could reasonably explain the occurrences in miners.

However, because exposure to taconite dust was not specifically studied, it wasn't ruled out as a potential contributor to the disease.

In March 2007, the department said an additional 35 miners developed mesothelioma from 1997 to 2005.

A Star Tribune newspaper investigation this month discovered that the department knew of the additional deaths in March 2006, but didn't announce them. Last week, the department said another six miners have died from the disease, bringing the total to 58.