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Asbestos Danger on Illinois' Beaches

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Jeff Camplin (center) walks the shore of Illinois State Beach Park with Paul Kakuris and NBC Chicago's Carol Marin. Photo provided.

by Paul Peters

Jeffery Camplin and Paul Kakuris believe that the beaches of Lake Michigan in Illinois, from Chicago up to the northeastern edge of the state, may pose one of the greatest environmental health risks in the country.
The beaches, they say, contain several forms of asbestos in high levels.
This includes amphibole asbestos from Libby, Montana, a remote town of about 2,600 in the northwest corner of a sparsely populated state. According to the Center for Asbestos Related Disease Libby amphibole has caused the death of at least 290 people and the sickening of almost 2,000 more, and has been shown to cause a deadly form of cancer, mesothelioma, even at low doses.
To this day, CARD says 10 new cases of asbestos disease are diagnosed each month in Libby, and it is widely considered to be the most deadly Superfund site in the nation.
Yet Camplin and Kakuris believe what they have discovered in Illinois may be worse, as 2 million people are annually visiting beaches contaminated with Libby amphibole, and studies have shown that the counties along the shore have some of the highest asbestos disease rates in the country.
They also believe that, should the International Olympic Committee discover this pollution, it could jeopardize the Chicago's chance to hold the 2016 Olympics.
And they assert that government agencies, like the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, (U.S. EPA), and several offices in the state of Illinois know about this problem and are actively covering it up, with the ATSDR committing scientific fraud in an effort to hide the dangers of this contamination.

A statement like this naturally invites skepticism. And, at first glance, it would be easy to dismiss Camplin and Kakuris as conspiracy theorists.
The ATSDR completed its most recent report on Illinois State Beach Park (ISBP) on March 10, 2009. The report draws its conclusions using data from a September 2007 U.S. EPA study. It concludes that "recreational use of the beach is not expected to harm people's health."
The EPA study, which made the same conclusions, was proceeded by another ATSDR report released in 2007, a report by the University of Illinois, Chicago released in 2006, a report done by ATSDR and the Illinois Department of Public Health in 2000, and finally a 1998 report by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR).
Each report states the same thing the 2009 report did, i.e., the park poses no threat.
On top of that, the site was been declared "a success story" by the EPA in 1991, when the agency finished its Superfund cleanup there.

When Jeff Camplin first heard about possible asbestos contamination at the Illinois Beach State Park (IBSP) in nearby Waukegan, he was a skeptic.
Camplin knows quite a bit about asbestos. Since 1988, he's been an EPA-accredited asbestos abatement instructor. He is a certified professional environmental auditor, president of an environmental services company, and was named Environmental Safety Professional of the Year by the American Society of Safety Engineers in 2006.
In the late 1990s, while teaching asbestos abatement classes in Mundelein, Illinois, he heard about pieces of asbestos containing material (ACM) being found by workers at nearby Illinois Beach State Park (IBSP), and the cleanup effort underway.
At the time, he says, "I thought it was a waste of taxpayer's money."
He had heard from the local news, and from students who had worked cleaning the beaches that the asbestos was "non-friable" meaning it was safely contained in pieces of cement or other materials, and could not turn into breathable dust.

Aerial photo of Midwest generation plant (left) with Johns-Manville site (right).

The state park bordered a former Johns-Manville plant Superfund site, where asbestos products had been manufactured for 60 years, so he didn't think it was surprising that ACM would wash up.
"When I had heard that a few pieces were showing up on the beach, and I saw that the state was paying guys to put on moon suits and respirators to clean it, my first reaction was that seemed like a little overkill to me," Camplin says.

But in April of 2003, Camplin got a call from Paul Kakuris. Kakuris was – and still is – president of the Illinois Dunesland Preservation Society, the environmental organization that co-founded Illinois Beach State Park in 1948. He is also a coastal processes scientist.
Kakuris, Camplin says, "Tends to talk really intense and really dramatic, and he was trying to tell me 'Hey, there's asbestos all over this beach,' and I said 'Look, I teach in this industry, I'm a professional in this industry, and from what I've heard, it's not really a big deal.'"
But Kakuris persisted, and Camplin finally agreed to meet with him at a cafe near the beach.
When Camplin walked into the cafe, he found Kakuris waiting.
"He had a stack of documents that had to be a foot high, and he pushes them across the table at me."
Kakuris started telling him about how state and federal agencies were involved in a conspiracy to cover up asbestos pollution at the beach, and were rigging test data.
"I'm thinking to myself, the next thing we're going to see, there was an Elvis sighting there, a UFO sighting, I mean to me it was just crazy talk," says Camplin.
Finally, Camplin asked to see where, exactly, this asbestos was.
Kakuris took him to a nearby section of beach, near the Johns-Manville Superfund site. The EPA had recently done a final clean up there, so Camplin didn't expect to see anything.
"We went to this little beach, where people were fishing, and this whole entire beach was literally covered with crushed asbestos," he says. "So I looked at Paul and I said, 'Oh my God, this is horrible.'"
He took the stack of documents Kakuris had offered earlier and stayed up through the night reading them.
Like a lot of people who have come into contact with asbestos issues in the U.S. Camplin was hooked.
"I did this to be a good citizen, to volunteer a few hours of my time," Camplin says. "I'm on my seventh year of being involved with this. If you would have told me five years ago that I'd be challenging the chief science officer of the Center for Disease Control on some of their studies, and testifying in front of congress, I would have said, 'You're nuts.'"
So how could five separate studies of the Illinois shoreline be wrong?

To understand Camplin and Kakuris' argument, it's necessary to understand how they believe the beaches came to be polluted in the first place.
Illinois Beach State Park consists of two separate parcels, known as the north and south units. Both are located just south of the Wisconsin state line.
On the southern border of the park is the Johns-Manville Superfund site, where from 1922 to 1988, the company manufactured asbestos products, including piping and brake pads.
Kakuris and Camplin believe this to be the chief source of asbestos pollution in Lake Michigan. For a number of years, the site had a pipeline that dumped asbestos-laden waste directly into the lake, and water from the site has drained into a nearby forest preserve. These issues are described in this Illinois EPA document.

On top of that, several locals have been quoted by reporters in the past saying they worked for Manville breaking up pieces of asbestos-containing pipe so it could be dumped in the lake.
A Chicago Sun-Times story from the late 1990s reports on park employees finding a "a 30-pound, 2-foot piece of 6-inch asbestos piping between the shoreline and park headquarters, north of the park's lodge."
Inside the pipe was a gasket with "Johns-Manville" imprinted on it.
The strange thing is that water in this part of Lake Michigan has been shown to have a strong southerly flow. The beaches should have been safe from waste dumped by Johns-Manville.
But in 1987, Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) built the North Point Marina on the northern end of the park. This caused the beaches in the park to erode, and the state needed some way of replenishing the sand.
South of the Johns-Manville site sits a Midwest Generation Co. (formerly Commonwealth Edison) power plant, and just south of that the Waukegan Harbor.
In the ATSDR's most recent report, it notes that 46,000 yards of sand was dredged from in front of the power plant between 1994 and 1995 and dumped on the north end of IBSP to replenish the park's sands.

Then, from at least 2001 to 2005, the Army Corps of Engineers dredged sand from the approach channel to the Waukegan Harbor and dumped it just off shore from IBSP. The dredging, according to the ATSDR, was done, "through an arrangement between IDNR, IEPA, and U.S. Army Corp of Engineers Chicago District."

But all five studies done on asbestos contamination at ISBP say the pollution was first discovered by a park official in 1997.
That year, former Chicago Sun-Times Senior Investigative Reporter Charles Nicodemus wrote that politicians and the public were outraged that the Illinois Department of Natural Resources had waited six months – until spring of 1998 – before alerting anyone to the asbestos.
But in April of 2000, Nicodemus dug up this Illinois EPA memo. The memo, made by Illinois EPA agent Chris Kallis, notes that an industrial hygienist for the Great Lakes Naval Training Center (GLNTC) "found pieces of friable asbestos scattered along the shores of Lake Michigan."
This asbestos was found in front of the power plant, where the sand was dredged and then dumped on the north end of the beach.
The memo also says, "It should be emphasized that this is a highly used recreation area."
It also notes that a joint investigation by the power company and Johns-Manville was done before the hygienist's report.
"Apparently quite a bit of asbestos was found," in this investigation, the memo states.
A cleanup had been initiated afterward by Johns-Manville, but according to the report, "It apparently was not successful, since a lot of the material was visible around the shorelines."
For several reasons, this proof of friable asbestos on the beach since 1990 is an important fact, the kind that should be found in the five reports done on ISBP. For one, it establishes that the agencies involved in allowing the power plant and the Army Corps of Engineers to dump dredged sand north of the beach should have known the sand was contaminated.
The fact that the problem was occurring one year before the EPA Superfund cleanup ended – and ongoing afterward – suggests the cleanup was inadequate.
It also shows the asbestos problem has been around for almost twice as long as the five official reports would lead one to believe. This would suggest that many more people have been exposed, for longer periods of time, and that, to keep washing up for nearly 20 years, there must be a quite large amount of asbestos in Lake Michigan.
But this memo did not find its way into reports on the beach, nor did it trigger any action by federal or state agencies at the time it was written.
According to the April 2000 story by Nicodemus, the Illinois EPA's excuse for not acting on the memo was that it thought the U.S. EPA had responsibility for cleaning the asbestos. When interviewed by Nicodemus, U.S. EPA's excuse was that they didn't think the problem was in their jurisdiction.
Government agencies finally began investigating asbestos at the park after Nicodemus published his first story on it in 1998.
In March of 1998, Nicodemus writes about a closed-door meeting called by the Illinois State Attorney's Office on the findings of the first study done on the park by Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), in which s state official declared that the beach posed "no significant health risk."
But Nicodemus spoke with Sen. Terry Link (D-Vernon Hills), who was allowed to attend the meeting.
The same official who claimed there was no risk was asked, according to Link, what happens when the ACM washes ashore and dries out.
The official, according to Link, said "Then it can become friable and then it could become dangerous."

Nicodemus confirmed this with other officials who attended the meeting.

The same year, the state contracted Hanson Engineers, a private company, to conduct air, water, and soil testing along the beach. A few months later, they reported that, while they found asbestos in 23 of 200 samples taken, the concentration was under one percent, which, the public was told at the time, was within acceptable health standards.
The one percent level, also known as the "Grace Rule" was never meant as a health standard, and, in 2004, the EPA once and for all cleared this up in this report.
The ATSDR, however, used information from the Hanson report to produce this report in 2000, which once again claimed the beach was safe. And, although the EPA has since definitively stated that one

percent is not a health standard, the ATSDR continues to cite these two studies as evidence of the beach's safety.

In 2003, after reviewing the evidence Kakuris had shown him, Camplin wrote what has become known as the Camplin Report.
The report brought up a host of issues with the two previous studies. It points out that asbestos was being discharged from a drainage pipe coming from the former Manville Superfund site. In one instance, he points out that it released millions of asbestos fibers in May of 2002, shortly after beach season had begun.
He notes that no study had been done to determine how much of this asbestos washes ashore, dries in the sand, and becomes airborne.
In his report, Camplin uses a March 21, 2000 memo from U.S. EPA Region 5 Toxicologist Arunas K. Draugelis to Brad Bradley, the U.S. EPA Superfund Site project manager, to address several problems with how testing has been done at the park, problems that linger to this day.
In the memo, Draugelis writes, "In this area by Lake Michigan, with strong winds and undisturbed conditions, you would expect not to find any asbestos fibers in the air samples, but the material is still there and the risk associated with asbestos is still there."
Draugelis is pointing to the fact that conditions on the shore make it a difficult area to conduct air tests.
Draugelis closed his memo by stating, "after inspecting Site 2 and with my knowledge of asbestos-related health hazards, I feel that the draft Risk-Assessment of the Johns-Manville Site #2 has not properly assessed the risk to people who would use the area."
The way tests are conducted, and especially the weather on those days, have been a continual weak point in asbestos studies at ISBP, according to Camplin and Kakuris. They often point to this field note, from the first ISBP study, which notes that samples are being taken in March, while it is raining.
Camplin points out that ATSDR studies do the opposite of what a test for asbestos is normally supposed to do. As an asbestos removal instructor, Camplin says the point is to make the test as stringent as possible, to make it very difficult for any asbestos to escape detection.
He describes an asbestos clearance test for public buildings, saying the area is first completely sealed off.
Then, for a half hour, a leaf blower is used to kick dust into the air. After that, high powered fans are turned on to keep the air moving, and the air is tested for an hour and a half.
This test, he says, is designed to ensure that no asbestos is missed. The testing methods used at the park, he says, all seem to do the opposite.
He points out that no test has ever occurred during the height of beach season, June, July or August, when the sand is hot and dry, and there are thousands of people agitating the sand, and possibly asbestos.
Camplin also points out that many tests were held on windy days, and asks rhetorically, "How do these fibers defy physics and know that they're not supposed to blow down the beach?"

In 2006 another report was released ostensibly by the University of Illinois, Chicago, although documents make it clear that the Attorney General's Task Force, whose members were appointed by state attorney general Lisa Madigan, had a heavy hand in writing the report.
The study acknowledges that its scope was determined by Task Force members, including IDNR, U.S. EPA, Illinois EPA, the United States Army Corp of Engineers and other parties who had a direct interest in showing that the park did not contain dangerous levels of asbestos. ATSDR reviewed the study.
If anything, this study should have raised more alarm with the ATSDR, EPA and other agencies involved, as it concluded that amphibole asbestos, which has been shown to be much more likely to cause cancer at low exposure levels, is present not only on the ISBP beaches, but on Oak Street Beach in Chicago as well.
Oak Street Beach is one of Chicago's most popular parks, and receives thousands of visitors during the height of summer.

Near Chicago's Oak Street Park, where amphibole asbestos has been found.

Oak Street beach was supposed to be a normal, uncontaminated beach to compare the ISBP beaches against.
Instead, it showed unusually high levels of amphibole asbestos. This should not have been surprising, had the ATSDR and other agencies looked at this study which found asbestos pollution in Lake Michigan along the Illinois shoreline, all the way to Indiana, as early as 1960.
But the Oak Street results were omitted from the final report, which stated that:

The Oak Street Beach site was selected as a background site for purposes of this study. However, sampling results indicated that the site had elevated asbestos structures per gram of PM10 compared to other beach sites. Due to the sensitivity of the sampling and analytical methods and in order to preserve a conservative approach, this site was subsequently excluded as a background site for purposes of this study because the results would have masked other study comparisons.

Amphibole fibers were, according to the report, found at nearly every site tested, but the levels were said to be below the EPA's threshold for action. Interestingly, the EPA had never assessed the risk posed by amphibole asbestos, which would allow it to determine a threshold for action. ATSDR is currently helping the EPA study amphibole risk in Libby, Montana.

Since 2006 several tests have claimed to show that Oak Street Beach is safe, but news accounts have questioned this.
In 2006 the ATSDR, with help from the IDNR, did yet another study, this time taking air samples.
The study determined that the beach was safe, although it did turn up some disconcertingly high levels of asbestos.
These high levels were noted in a memo written to the ATSDR by the Illinois Johns-Manville Superfund manager, Brad Bradley.
"The actual air monitoring results raise concerns regarding the safety of human use of the beaches," Bradley writes. "What is going on here, either the beach is safe or the safety is questionable."
Bradley's questions led to yet another study in 2007, this one done by the EPA. Once again, the study was done outside of beach season, during a week which saw several days of rain.
In a critique of this study, Camplin writes:

Of the 20 air samples taken during children's recreational activities of sandcastle building, 4 samples (or 20% of children's activities) disturbed measurable levels of asbestos fibers including the more deadly amphibole form of asbestos. ATSDR must acknowledge that 20% of children's activities

resulting in detectable levels of asbestos fibers in wet sand, during non-beach season conditions, are not considered acceptable findings.

Questions over the validity of the 2007 study led to the latest one, released by the ATSDR on March 10, 2009.

In a case of either incredibly bad timing, or utter audacity, this was the exact same day that a congressional committee released this report. The report looks at the work of ATSDR in several locations across the country, including at Illinois State Beach Park. Camplin testified before the committee about the ongoing issues at the park.
Among the committee's findings:

Many independent scientists, medical professionals, local environmental groups and public health advocates believe that rather than objectively and aggressively trying to identify the source of reported health problems, ATSDR often seeks ways to avoid linking local health problems to specific sources of hazardous chemicals. Instead, says one current ATSDR scientist who spoke to the Committee on the condition of anonymity:
"It seems like the goal is to disprove the communities' concerns rather than actually trying to prove exposures."

Camplin, Kakuris, and the Illinois Dunesland Society have submitted responses to the ATSDR's most recent study, and, despite the history of studies at ISBP, they believe that this time it will be different.
"I have faith in the Obama administration," Kakuris says. He believes that he and Camplin's latest responses to the ATSDR, combined with the criticism of the agency by congress, and the Obama administration's promises of restoring integrity to science, openness to government, and increased environmental protection, have made this the perfect time for change on the beaches of Illinois.
Kakuris believes anyone involved in squelching reports about asbestos risks at Illinois beach pose should be held accountable.
"If you walk the beaches and you see these little kids all over the beach, playing in the sand, and burying themselves…" says Kakuris. "They're taking this asbestos in, and yet you have these public officials rigging tests to say its safe. You can't just let them get away with this."
For Camplin and Kakuris, the only remedy at this point would be to have an outside group of independent scientists look at the beach.
"I think that ATSDR and CDC and USEPA are not capable of doing an honest and credible job," Kakuris says.
But, talking about more testing, he stops himself.
"The thing is, whatever tests have been done, if you do good testing, you're only going to find more asbestos. Where is the point that we stop spending money and start going forward with solutions?" he asks.

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