OUR TOXIC BEACH

This photo was taken nearly 10 years ago, when the Sun-Times first exposed asbestos pollution at Illinois Beach State Park. It’s still the state’s most-visited park, drawing 2 million to 3 million visitors a year. But is it safe? Federal and state authorities say it is. But an EPA official has brought up “concerns regarding the safety of human use of the beaches.” | CAROL MARIN AND DON MOSELEY REPORT ON PAGES 6-7
OUR SPOILED STORE

INVESTIGATION | How safe is Illinois Beach State Park?
EPA finds ‘elevated’ levels of most toxic form of asbestos

By Carol Marin and Don Noseley
Sun Times NBC

On a warm day in July, Sara Anderson took her boys, ages 6 and 8, from their home in rural northwest Illinois to play at Illinois Beach State Park, the same beach she’d been to as a child.

Not far from the towel they spread on the sand a piece of washed-up debris that was a stark reminder of a problem that’s marred the park for more than 10 years: Asbestos.

Nearly a decade ago, the Chicago Sun-Times first exposed asbestos pollution at the park near Zion. Now, according to a letter from a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency official, “significant elevated” levels of the most toxic form of the known carcinogen have been found there.

The far north suburban beach remains safe, federal and state authorities said in interviews. But an April 24, 2007, letter from an EPA official to a federal health official in Chicago raises concerns. In the letter, Brad Bradley, a U.S. EPA project manager, cites “concerns regarding the safety of human use of the beaches.”

His letter came in response to tests last August by an arm of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC’s Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry used grading equipment on the beach so it could measure asbestos fibers channeled up from the sand into the air. It found the most toxic form of asbestos fibers — amosite asbestos.

The mere presence of asbestos in sand or soil isn’t considered a human health hazard. The danger is if pieces are broken and asbestos particles get into the air. Asbestos can be deadly if inhaled, leading to a form of cancer.

“It’s my understanding that we have found some amphibole asbestos in some of the air samples,” Richard Karl, Superfund director for the EPA’s regional office in Chicago, acknowledged in an interview. “Illinois Beach State Park is the state’s most visited park. The presence of asbestos there is hardly a secret. Visitors are well aware of the asbestos-containing materials that have washed up and scattered along the beach.

But it’s what’s not visible — asbestos fibers embedded in the sand — that worries Jeff Camplin. In 2003, Camplin, who runs an asbestos-consulting firm, authored a report for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. Camplin, 54, is a former只知道

“When you do disturb this sand, measurable, dangerous levels of toxic amphibole asbestos are in the air,” Camplin said in an interview. “If it was my choice, I would have the park shut down.”

Paul Kutarik, president of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, doesn’t go that far. “We’re not saying: Shut the park down,” Kutarik said. “We are saying: Shut the beaches.

Asbestos at the park may come from a number of sources, according to federal and state authorities. Among them: the old Johns-Manville plant at the south end of the park, which, from the 1940s until 1985, manufactured products containing asbestos, including roofing materials. It’s now a fenced-off EPA Superfund site. Other potential sources include demolished homes along the beach that were built with asbestos products and polluted sand dredged from the lake.

In studies in 1995, 2000 and last year, the state found small amounts of asbestos and concluded there was “minimal health risk.”

“I think it’s fine,” said Dr. Rosemary Solis, an occupational physician and professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago who was part of a team of experts that did the state’s 2000 study.

But in declaring the park safe, the government has relied on a test viewed by critics as outdated and in the process of being revamped, the U.S. EPA acknowledged.

“The science associated with asbestos and the risk associated with outdoor exposure to asbestos isn’t at the level we would like to see it,” the EPA’s Karl said.

The testing that led to the latest safety concerns was done last August by the CDC’s Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. Its report said, in part: “Based on the bulk analysis of sand samples collected, the sand in [and if] itself does not appear to pose a significant source of asbestos fibers.”

The EPA’s Bradley responded there might be a problem with this statement, noting “air samples near the beach grading equipment were significantly elevated.”

“The inconsistencies in the actual monitoring results raise concerns regarding the safety of human use of the beaches,” Bradley wrote.

Federal authorities have a review panel studying the test results.

For now, Sara Anderson, the Richmond mom, is aware of the asbestos concerns but not overly worried: “I’m making sure the kids are taking showers when they get home.”

Still, she added, “It would be wonderful to be able to say that it was all cleaned up and safe for everybody all the time.”

Contributing: Dave McBride

Workers clean up asbestos along the shore in 1998.

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A danger sign marks an area where asbestos was found in April at the Illinois Beach State Park.

Michael Schmidt/Chicago Sun Times

ASBESTOS DANGERS

- Tiny asbestos fibers “are only dangerous if they are disturbed, causing fibers to float in the air and allowing them to be easily inhaled.”
- If inhaled, can be deadly. Can cause lung cancer, mesothelioma and other health problems.

Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

ABOUT THE PARK

Illinois Beach State Park, outside Zion, is the state’s most visited park.
- 4,160 acres
- 6.5 miles of Lake Michigan beachfront
- 2 million to 3 million visitors a year
Source: Illinois Department of Natural Resources

Sun-Times coverage of this issue from 1998.

Asbestos in state park

Asbestos puts park in timbo

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