

Nevada health officials dismayed with asbestos find

By Deborah Blum, New York Times

For the past few years, the geologists Brenda Buck and Rodney Metcalf have combed the wild terrain of Southern Nevada, analyzing its stony dunes and rocky outcroppings – and to their dismay, tallying mounting evidence of a landscape filled with asbestos.

Asbestos occurs naturally in many parts of the country, mostly in the West but also along some mountain ranges in the East. But in Nevada, the scientists found, natural erosion and commercial development were sending the fibers into the wind.

Worried about the possible health risks, Buck and Metcalf, professors of geoscience at UNLV, reached out to experts in asbestos-related diseases. With data from Nevada's cancer registry, an epidemiologist prepared a preliminary report that outlined what she felt was a troubling pattern of mesothelioma – a cancer often related to asbestos exposure – among residents of the affected areas.

But if the scientists expected to be applauded by state officials for their initiative, they were mistaken.

Upon learning of the report, the Nevada Department of Health forced the epidemiologist, Francine Baumann of the University of Hawaii, to withdraw a presentation of the findings at a scientific conference and revoked her access to the state cancer registry. Metcalf and Buck offered to meet with state officials but say they were rebuffed.

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