The Clinton administration, under intense pressure from industry, has set aside plans to list as a cancer-causing substance the fiber glass insulation used in 90 percent of U.S. homes.[1]

Four major manufacturers of fiber glass insulation have campaigned for three years to prevent their product from being labeled a carcinogen by the federal National Toxicology Program (NTP). Members of the NTP concluded unanimously in 1990 that fiber glass "may reasonably be anticipated to be a carcinogen" and were preparing to list fiber glass that way in the SEVENTH ANNUAL (1992) REPORT ON CARCINOGENS, the NTP's annual listing of cancer-causing substances. The ANNUAL REPORT is mandated by Public Law 95-622 and represents a consensus of 10 federal health agencies.[2] The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), of the World Health Organization, listed fiber glass as a "probable carcinogen" in 1987.

In June of this year Mr. Clinton's Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS), Donna Shalala, ordered a review of the National Toxicology Program's decision to list fiber glass as a carcinogen, and thus postponed publication of the SEVENTH ANNUAL REPORT. It is the first time HHS has ever called for review of an NTP decision.

Shalala's decision was a direct response to pressure from the National American Insulation Manufacturers Association (NAIMA). NAIMA hired Washington, D.C. attorney Harrison Wellford, a former "Nader's Raider" and member of the Clinton transition team who had worked with Shalala in the Jimmy Carter White House in the late '70s.

On February 25 Wellford wrote a "Dear Donna" letter in which he reminisced about their days together in the White House. Then he complained about the process by which government scientists had concluded that fiber glass causes cancer, and finally he threatened that NAIMA might take legal action if the NTP listed fiber glass as a probable carcinogen. NAIMA has four members: CertainTeed Corp.; Owens-Corning Fiber Glass Corp.; Knauf Fiber Glass GMBH; and Schuller International, Inc. (formerly Manville Co.).

Soon after Shalala received Wellford's letter, the National Toxicology Program staff prepared a response, denying his request for a re-review of fiber glass. But that letter was never sent.

In late May, representatives of NAIMA met with Donald A. Henderson, deputy assistant secretary for health and science at HHS, where they found a receptive ear. At the same time, the industry organized a letter-writing campaign to members of Congress by employees of fiber glass manufacturing plants.

On June 9 Shalala told Wellford she was granting the delay he had asked for. Three weeks later, the industry filed a formal petition asking for the delay. The industry challenged the criteria used by HHS and NTP in determining what substances to list as carcinogens. The World Health Organization uses the same criteria.

A week after the formal petition was filed, according to the REPORT. It is the first time HHS has ever called for review of an NTP decision.
health, internationally. It is this aspect of Donna Shalala's final response to her friends at NAIMA that will be most interesting, and most telling.

--Peter Montague


[2] The annual list of carcinogens is drawn up by an inter-agency Working Group for the Annual Reports on Carcinogens, which includes representatives from the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR); the Centers for Disease Control (CDC); the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH); the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC); the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA); the Food and Drug Administration (FDA); the National Cancer Institute (NCI); the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS); the National Library of Medicine (NLM); and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

[3] The early history of research on fiber glass was reviewed by Katherine and Peter Montague, "Fiber Glass," ENVIRONMENT Vol. 16 (September 1974), pgs. 6-9.


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