



WHATCOM COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT Solid Waste Program – Asbestos – Swift Creek

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Swift Creek Naturally Occurring Asbestos

Swift Creek is located on Sumas Mountain and flows west towards the town of Everson. Historically, in order to prevent flooding, approximately 120,000 cubic yards of sediment was dredged annually from the creek. Recent studies indicate that the riverbed sediment contains naturally occurring asbestos at levels that present concerns regarding potential health risks and sediment management methods.

Frequently Asked Questions:

Why is there naturally occurring asbestos in Swift Creek?

Swift Creek, which flows into the Sumas River, has recently been found to contain high levels of naturally occurring asbestos. The asbestos is in the water and in the riverbed sediment. The source of the asbestos is an area on Sumas Mountain, near the base of a landslide, which is eroding. The area that is eroding contains asbestos, which is a fibrous mineral that may be found in certain types of rock or soil. As this area erodes, asbestos is deposited into the water and sediment. Most of the asbestos found in Swift Creek is a type of asbestos called chrysotile, which is the same type of asbestos most commonly used in commercial products such as brake linings.

Where is the naturally occurring asbestos and how much is there?

Asbestos is present in the water and riverbed of Swift Creek, from the headwaters on Sumas Mountain to the Sumas River. Asbestos is also in the sediment dredge piles, located on the creek banks, in between Goodwin Road and Oatg Coles Road. Asbestos that does not settle out in Swift Creek is found downstream in the water and riverbed of the Sumas River, from Swift Creek to the Canadian border. Asbestos may also be found in some places where dredged sediment from Swift Creek has been used as fill for walkways, driveways, or other construction projects. Studies of Swift Creek, conducted by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), indicate that samples of the sediment dredge piles average just under 2% asbestos and range up to over 4% asbestos. Samples of the dried white layers on the creek banks have been found to contain up to 43% asbestos.

Can naturally occurring asbestos present a health risk?

Breathing asbestos can present a health risk. Asbestos may become airborne when people disturb the ground by walking, cycling, or riding horses on the riverbed, banks or dredge piles. The asbestos may also become airborne if sediment from the riverbed is used for home construction projects, such as driveways or pathways. Exposure to asbestos occurs when airborne asbestos fibers are inhaled through breathing and the fibers enter the lungs. In some cases, when significant exposure to asbestos has occurred, the fibers can damage the lungs of the membranes that cover the lungs. Breathing asbestos may cause the development of asbestos related disease such as lung cancer, mesothelioma, or asbestosis. Mesothelioma is a rare cancer caused by asbestos and occurs in the lung covering or in the lining of the abdominal cavity. Asbestosis is a scarring of the lungs that decreases the lungs ability to function. Pleural plaques can also develop which are characterized by a thickening and hardening of the lining that covers the lungs and chest cavity and are a sign of asbestos exposure.

Will I get asbestos related disease if I have been exposed to naturally occurring asbestos?

Being exposed to asbestos does not necessarily mean that a person will develop asbestos related disease. There are many factors that contribute to the risk of developing disease. The most important of these are:

- How long and how frequently a person was exposed to asbestos.
- How long it has been since the exposure to asbestos.
- The amount of asbestos a person was exposed to.
- The size and type of asbestos a person was exposed to.

- Whether or not a person smokes cigarettes, since asbestos exposure increases the chances of a person who smokes, getting lung cancer.
- Whether or not other pre-existing lung conditions are present.

In most cases, people who develop asbestos related disease do not show signs or symptoms of these diseases until at least 10 to 20 years after they were exposed to asbestos. Some asbestos is found in air, in background concentrations, from the use of commercial products such as brake pad linings, insulation or roofing shingles. Asbestos was banned from use in the late 1970s in drywall, popcorn ceilings, tile mastic, and other products commonly found in older homes.

Since the exact level of exposure to asbestos that may result in disease is not known, it is important to minimize additional exposures to asbestos.

What is being done to manage the naturally occurring asbestos in Swift Creek?

Swift Creek used to be dredged annually in order to prevent flooding. The dredge sediment containing the naturally occurring asbestos was stockpiled on the banks of the creek, where much of it remains. Currently, because of the high levels of asbestos that have been detected in the sediment, removal of the sediment for construction purposes or any use is prohibited. Local, State and Federal agencies are working to determine the best and safest methods for managing the sediment. The proposed Whatcom County Sediment Management Plan and related information can be found [here](#).

Where can I get more information about Swift Creek naturally occurring asbestos?

- [EPA Swift Creek Site](#)
- [Washington Department of Health February, 2006 Health Consultation report on Swift Creek](#)
- [Washington Department of Health February, 2008 Health Consultation Report on Swift Creek](#)
- Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry [Naturally Occurring Asbestos](#)

Will there be any public meetings held regarding Swift Creek health and sediment management issues?

Public meetings regarding health and sediment management issues will be held as necessary. The date, time and location of planned public meetings will be posted to this web page.

Who can I call if I have questions about how Swift Creek naturally occurring asbestos may affect my health?

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