



At a Glance

Catalyst for Improving the Environment

Why We Did This Review

In response to a congressional request, we evaluated how the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) communicates information to the public at the Libby Asbestos Superfund Site in Libby, Montana.

Background

The Libby site includes portions of the towns of Libby and Troy, Montana. An inactive vermiculite mine contaminated with naturally occurring asbestos is located 7 miles outside of Libby. About 12,000 people live within a 10-mile radius of the town of Libby. EPA has conducted cleanup activities at the Libby site since 2000. EPA policy on community involvement goes beyond the letter of the law and recommends implementing additional activities to ensure community participation in the Superfund cleanup process.

For further information, contact our Office of Congressional, Public Affairs and Management at (202) 566-2391.

The full report is at: www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2011/20110803-11-P-0430.pdf

An Overall Strategy Can Improve Communication Efforts at Asbestos Superfund Site in Libby, Montana

What We Found

Region 8 does not have an overall communication strategy to guide, coordinate, and evaluate its communication efforts at the Libby Asbestos Superfund Site. Despite extensive communication efforts that exceed minimum Superfund requirements, Region 8 has not fully satisfied community concerns about health risk or effectively communicated the limitations of its risk assessment. Libby residents repeatedly raised questions about recontamination and EPA's ongoing and planned activities, including the cleanup of operable unit 1 and activity-based sampling events, even though Region 8 has provided information on those subjects. Recurring questions may signify that Region 8 needs to address them more clearly.

We also found that some Region 8 outreach products may be difficult for Libby residents to understand. Some materials intended for the general public are written for a highly educated audience. Understandable outreach products ensure that Region 8's messages are successfully communicated to the public.

An overall communication strategy could help Region 8 assess the effectiveness of and improve its communication activities. Region 8's community engagement plan could serve as the overall communication strategy with the addition of guidance-recommended elements. These elements include key messages, timelines, measures of success, and mechanisms for identifying public concerns and obtaining public feedback. The addition of these elements to the community engagement plan may assist EPA in better addressing community concerns and helping the public make informed decisions regarding risk.

What We Recommend

We recommend that the EPA Region 8 Regional Administrator ensure that Libby outreach products are readable for a general audience. We also recommend that the Regional Administrator revise the Libby community engagement plan to serve as the overall communication strategy by adding key messages to address specific public concerns and site activities, timelines for community involvement activities and outreach products, measures for successful communication, and mechanisms for identifying community concerns and collecting feedback. We also recommend implementing a process for ongoing evaluation of Region 8's communication. Region 8 agreed to take sufficient corrective actions.