

Suits blame factory for causing ailments

But soil and water tests near former insulation factory find no harmful chemical levels.

By KEVIN MURPHY
The Kansas City Star

Five lawsuits filed in recent days allege that a long-closed plant that manufactured fiber insulation contributed to brain tumors and other illnesses in Cameron, Mo.

The lawsuits in Clinton County seek monetary damages from companies affiliated with Rockwool Industries, which operated a factory about three miles west of Cameron. The company, which converted iron into fiber insulation, dissolved in 1991.

Missouri and federal environmental agencies investigating health concerns have tested soil and water near the plant and a nearby quarry. Recent tests found high levels of arsenic and lead in some soil but not in amounts harmful to health, officials said.

The Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services is looking at whether there is a cluster of cancers in Cameron, about 50 miles north of Kansas City. As of two weeks ago, 68 people returned state surveys reporting cases of a benign or malignant tumor in the brain or central nervous system.

The lawsuits were filed separately by Cameron residents Cyndee Gardner, Carol Helms, Rebecca Stewart, Michael O'Loughlin, and Hope and Stephen Soldberg.

None of the lawsuits states that the plaintiffs themselves contracted tumors, though relatives did in some cases. The

lawsuits seek class-action status so that thousands of people could potentially be eligible for damages.

Defendants in the case include the Susquehanna Corp. of Delaware, which owned and managed Rockwool, according to the lawsuit. Also named is Eteroutremer, a Belgian firm the lawsuit says owned Susquehanna. Another defendant is the former Rockwool manager, Loren Brookshier of Cowgill, Mo. None of the defendants could be reached for comment.

The lawsuits don't say whether the plaintiffs worked at the plant.

Missouri health officials are analyzing the tumor cases to determine any common denominators of victims, such as where they lived or worked and what specific types of tumors they developed.

About 250 people attended a public meeting in Cameron last week called by the Missouri Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

State and federal officials said samples of soil, water and waste material from Rockwool were tested for about 180 minerals and contaminants.

The lawsuits allege that Rockwool dumped toxic substances in and around the plant between 1974 and 1982, including properties where the plaintiffs live.

The lawsuits say Rockwool buried hazardous waste near the plant and in a nearby quarry.

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