

Complaint alleges park asbestos crimes

Group says Grand Teton covered up improper treatment of hazardous material.

By Cory Hatch, Jackson Hole, Wyo.

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A criminal complaint to be filed today alleges that Grand Teton National Park officials knowingly violated federal law when they ordered workers to improperly remove, store and transport asbestos from Colter Bay Village in 2001.

Attorneys with Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility filed a criminal complaint with the Environmental Protection Agency that named former Grand Teton superintendent Jack Neckles, acting superintendent Steve Iobst, facility manager Cam Hugie and environmental engineer Bob Wemple.

In the complaint, PEER alleges "criminal conduct."

"The conduct in question involves the National Park Service management's deliberate failure to comply with environmental regulations, conspiracy to hide such violations, and consistent practice of placing their staff and the general public in great danger, as well as the destruction of the environment," the complaint says.

Two sources close to Grand Teton cast doubt on the claims, saying that charges of criminal conspiracy may originate with a disgruntled employee.

The document alleges that park officials violated the Clean Air Act and the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act starting in May 2001 when replacing frozen water pipes in Colter Bay Village.

PEER says contractors mistakenly removed 2,500 feet of pipe containing hazardous asbestos, which was then dumped alongside the road and crushed by vehicles.

Improper disposal claimed

"Iobst ... instructed GTNP road crew, without training in asbestos or knowledge that the pipes contained asbestos, to move the pipes piled up along the road to the Colter Bay dump site," the document states.

At the "dump site," the asbestos may have mixed with dirt that was subsequently distributed around the park. Further, the asbestos may have come in contact with fire grates that were later distributed to camp sites in the park, according to PEER.

On May 24, "the pipes were loaded into uncovered trucks and transported across state lines to the Circular Butte landfill in Mud Lake, Idaho," the complaint says. "Once again, the employees engaged in the transportation of the asbestos-containing materials were untrained and lacked the proper safety gear, such as gloves and masks."

As a result of an employee complaint, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration cited the Park Service for "unsafe and unhealthful working conditions," according to PEER. The notice reported that the park failed to conduct an exposure assessment prior to removing pipe containing 5 percent asbestos, failed to properly dispose of the asbestos waste and failed to inform the employees removing the pipe of the presence of asbestos and the precautions to be taken, the group said.

Christine Erickson, staff attorney for PEER, said park officials knowingly violated the law.

'Extremely serious'

"It's one thing to follow the regulations and mess up; it's another to disregard the regulations," she said from her office in Washington, D.C. "We don't know how much asbestos was released. It could have harmed visitors in the past and it could still be harming visitors. It's an extremely serious violation."

"We believe that they tried to keep it as low key as possible," Erickson continued. "That's when they decided to take the pipes that were remaining to Idaho. ... to get rid of the evidence."

Grand Teton spokeswoman Jackie Skaggs said the current park administration isn't familiar with the incident.

"We do take health and safety concerns seriously as a park," she said. "We're constantly looking at ways to protect both visitors and park employees, and we're beholden to industry standards whenever we're dealing with hazardous materials.

"We look forward to working with EPA and responding to the allegations brought forth by PEER," Skaggs continued.

Erickson also faulted Grand Teton with failure to provide proper ventilation in the park's maintenance building at Moose. In the building, park vehicles are garaged near poorly ventilated offices, a problem park officials acknowledged earlier this year.

"We've known that the maintenance building does not meet all life and safety regulations and that is one of the primary [concerns] that we're trying to mitigate by the extensive rehabilitation project that we will start on [this fall or next spring]," Skaggs said.

A multimillion-dollar rehabilitation project at Moose should address the ventilation issue, she said.