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Cautious approach appropriate says extractives sector

The Chief Executive of MinEx, the National Health and Safety Council for the extractives sector, says a precautionary approach is appropriate on the presence in Auckland of the mineral erionite.

Wayne Scott says an article by Auckland's university academics in today's New Zealand Medical Journal is cautionary rather than alarmist and that sits appropriately alongside the potential risks posed.

Erionite, a rare asbestos-like mineral, is found in areas of Auckland's underlying volcanic rock, and its fibres, if inhaled are said in the article to be more carcinogenic than asbestos. The academics from Auckland University and Unitech note much construction work is underway and planned in Auckland, including tunnels.

Scott says the presence of erionite, like many other naturally occurring fibrous minerals is not in doubt.

"The issue is actually not one of particular concern for the public because fibrous minerals only present a health hazard when airborne and where exposure has occurred over many years.

"However, exposure to workers at any levels that may affect their health is a risk. For mining, quarrying and tunnelling workers, this includes activities that generate dust such as drilling, sample cutting and collection, blasting, and crushing."

Historically Scott says, workplace exposure to asbestiform fibres over long periods of time has led to diseases such as asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma.

"However, because of the efforts now made to reduce dust, the concentrations of fibres encountered in the extractives industry today are typically over a hundred times lower than those experienced historically and below current exposure standards."

He also says extractive operations ensure all workers get trained to use and maintain personal protective equipment (PPE), which is required to be worn for specific tasks, along with available engineering controls and other protective measures. Audits and air monitoring are used extensively throughout the extractives sector, including measurement of airborne fibres to assess the potential exposure of workers.

"Our analysis has not identified any cases of exposure to the public from such activities, that would present any risk to health.

"Moreover, there has not been one documented case of mesothelioma (lung disease) resulting from exposure to erionite in New Zealand or Australia. WorkSafe does not have a Worker Exposure Standard for erionite and in fact no country in the world has a WES for this mineral."

Wayne Scott says it would be useful to know where deposits of erionite are found but this would be better done as part of a more comprehensive minerals survey.

"We are a nation focused on rebuilding our economy on two principal activities – infrastructure and farming. Both of those rely on minerals such as aggregate and lime, yet we don't know where all the deposits lie.

"Rather than spending money finding where one rare and well-managed mineral exists, the Government should fund a survey of all mineral resources," says Wayne Scott.

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