

Statement of Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton
Hearing on Workplace Safety and Asbestos Contamination
Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pension
July 31, 2001

I would like to thank Senator Murray for requesting and chairing this hearing today on the important issue of asbestos contamination and workplace safety. Senator Murray's leadership on this issue is to be applauded.

Sitting on both the HELP committee and the Committee on Environment and Public Works, I have come to appreciate the impacts our environment can have on our health and the health of our families – whether it is the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, the products we use. And whether we are talking about the general environment around us, our home environment, our work environment, or our children's school environment – these can all, without a doubt, have an impact on our health.

I don't think I have to tell anyone here how much skepticism there is out there when it comes to environmental health issues – and rightfully so, in many cases. The problem often is that we don't have enough information. We don't have the facts we need to make concrete connections between our health and the things in our environment that may be making us sick.

I am pleased to say that we are making progress in this area. With the mapping of the human genome, and other new genetic and scientific tools we've recently developed or discovered, we are now on the verge of making some major environmental health discoveries. And it is only then, when we are able to replace the fear with the facts, that we will truly be able to tackle our most pressing environmental health challenges.

Now, the topic of today's hearing – asbestos – is somewhat different from a lot of other environmental health concerns. Because in the case of asbestos, there are clear, indisputable links that have already been identified between asbestos exposure and human health. We know for a fact that exposure to asbestos causes asbestosis, mesothelioma and other lung cancers, and pleural plaques.

In fact, elevated death rates for lung cancer in coastal areas of Georgia, Virginia and northeastern Florida and Louisiana were linked to shipyard workers' exposure to asbestos during World War II.

We were able to make this connection between asbestos exposure and elevated cancer rates in these shipyard workers because we had good cancer data. And we had that data because we were tracking cancer incidence rates.

I think we need more tracking efforts like this in order to be able to better identify and address environmental health risks. That is why I have put forward an eight-point plan to address our environmental health challenges, including:

- establishing a national tracking system for chronic diseases that may be linked to the environment,
- placing environmental health officers in every state's public health department, and
- creating a chronic disease rapid-response force that would bring environmental, scientific and health experts into potential disease clusters, including those revealed by the national tracking system.

I plan to introduce legislation to create a national health tracking network with my colleague Harry Reid and others after the recess. And I am hopeful that we will have a hearing on these broader environmental health issues in this Committee. We have already had two such hearings in the Environment Committee – one in Fallon, Nevada, and one on Long Island.

The key is, however, that once we have the information, once we know that there is something in our environment that is making people sick, we need to properly address that threat to human health.

Most people believe that we've taken care of the asbestos problem – that it is a problem of the past. And why wouldn't they? As I mentioned before, we know asbestos causes cancer and other health problems, so of course we must be taking care of it. Right?

Well, I look forward to hearing from today's witnesses about whether or not we are doing all that can and should be done to address the environmental health threats posed by asbestos exposure.

While I know that we are taking a number of steps at the federal level, I am concerned that we may not be doing enough. And I am not just concerned about the workplace, I am also concerned about schools and whether they are safe for kids – including threats posed by asbestos in older, “sick” schools around the country.

I believe we need more information about all of the possible health and educational impacts that school environments have on our children. I was pleased to pass an amendment to the education bill to study this issue and learn more about what effect mold in ventilation systems or asbestos in buildings have on students’ health and cognitive abilities.

And it appears that we may need more information about all of the possible health impacts of asbestos and asbestos-like compounds in the workplace. For example, in New York, there have been hundreds of claims filed by talc mine workers found to have work-related respiratory disabilities. Documents show that miners, millers, and mine supervisors in New York have died or are dying from disease caused by fibers – mostly asbestos – in their lungs.”

And there is at least one facility in New York that we know received materials from the vermiculite mine in Libby that we will hear more about today. This site has been referred to OSHA for further action.

So again, I think these environmental and workplace issues are vitally important. I want to thank Senator Murray for calling today's hearing. I am sorry that I am not able to stay longer, but I will be reviewing all of the testimony presented today.

Thank you.