

Being 'asbestos aware' for naturally occurring asbestos – Port Macquarie-Hastings Council

COUNCIL NAME

Port Macquarie-Hastings Council

WEB ADDRESS

www.pmhc.nsw.gov.au

SIZE

3,683 square kilometres

POPULATION

76,563

Overview

The Port Macquarie-Hastings Council area is located on the Mid North Coast of New South Wales, about 420 kilometres north of Sydney, and 510 kilometres south of Brisbane. Asbestos is known to occur naturally in the landscape in parts of the Local Government Area. Council appreciates the need to not only be 'asbestos aware' when it comes to asbestos in the built environment but to also be 'asbestos aware' when it comes to asbestos in the natural environment. Council staff are actively increasing their knowledge of where naturally occurring asbestos is located and various risk management controls by attending training and liaising with WorkCover NSW, the NSW Environment Protection Authority, Roads and Maritime Services and other experts. By working together with other agencies and providing information to the community, Council is helping to ensure the naturally occurring asbestos in the landscape is properly managed.

Background

Although asbestos is a commercial term, all asbestos has originated from the landscape. Asbestos in its natural state is referred to as 'naturally occurring asbestos' (NOA). The mineral may occur in veins within rock formations and can be found when building roads, working on construction sites and undertaking other excavation.

Issues

Landscaping at a preschool

In late 2014, a council outdoor staff member noticed that rock at a local preschool, which was intended for use in landscaping at the preschool, looked suspiciously like NOA. The rock had been freely offered to the preschool by a well-meaning local resident. The resident had sourced the rock from their property and had not suspected the material to be asbestos.

The council worker notified the preschool that the material could be asbestos. The preschool director contacted council for advice and was advised to ensure the rocks were inaccessible to staff, students and the public, dampened and covered with plastic (anchored down) so the potential hazard could be isolated until removed. It was advised that the material could be tested to confirm the presence or absence of asbestos to inform how it should be handled, or the rocks could be treated as asbestos and handled, transported and disposed of properly. As a precaution, the rocks were treated as if they were asbestos and were removed by trained council staff, free of charge. Where material is suspected to be asbestos, it is safer to assume it is asbestos and treat it accordingly.

Motorcycle track

The area used by the Hastings Valley Motor Cycle Club (HVMCC) for its club activities includes spectator areas, a carpark and two tracks; a formed jump track and an outlying enduro track on natural ground. During a site contamination assessment of other contaminants present on the site, NOA was found to be present in the carpark. A later survey of the 'enduro' track found more NOA rock outcrops, an area where it is important to ensure the asbestos is not disturbed.

Roadworks

In 2014, an excavation of a service trench adjacent to roadworks in The Ruins Way, Port Macquarie encountered rock which was suspected of being NOA. Subsequent sampling and testing confirmed the presence of Chrysotile (white asbestos) in the samples. Work was suspended and WorkCover was advised. The contractor was required to complete an Asbestos Management Plan (AMP) and implement the precautionary measures detailed within the AMP. WorkCover officers attended the work site throughout the duration of the remaining work to review the containment measures and to ensure the NOA was managed in accordance with the AMP. The NOA was disposed of at a licensed waste facility.

Outcomes

The abovementioned examples show the imperative of being 'asbestos aware'. The astute thinking and proactive response from the council worker may have prevented asbestos being used in landscaping at the preschool. NOA can be difficult to identify by sight, especially by a lay person who may not be 'asbestos aware'. This demonstrates the importance of having awareness raising materials available for the community. Particularly in instances such as this where the landscaping works or earth moving work is minor work that does not require council approval; and where the community may not necessarily seek the advice of council. Port Macquarie-Hastings Council has actively sought to provide the community with information on asbestos, particularly during Asbestos Awareness Month in November, directing people to the asbestosawareness.com.au website.

Air monitoring for the presence of asbestos fibres during the use of the enduro track at the HVMCC site was recently completed and the findings will be reported to Council.

Council's Work Health & Safety (WH&S) Asbestos Procedure was recently amended to include a section on NOA. The Environment Protection Authority advocates the removal and proper disposal of asbestos to prevent future legacy issues. However, recent advice from the EPA with regards to NOA discovered during roadworks indicates that burial of NOA in the road reserve where it is unlikely to be disturbed at any time in the future may be appropriate provided certain precautions are taken. These precautions include accurate recording of the amount, exact location (dimensions and depth) of the burial site in council records for future use, in case the area needs to be excavated at some future time. These details are to be accurately recorded in a Waste Management Plan and be kept in council's record keeping system.

Key Learnings

- The practical value of staff training to assist staff to be aware of asbestos, both in carrying out their duties and also in noticing suspected NOA in the LGA.

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- The need for the community to be aware of NOA, not only in relation to larger developments requiring council approval but also in minor earthmoving works that are of a smaller scale but can nonetheless, disturb NOA.
 - Improved mapping of potential NOA locations in the Port Macquarie-Hastings Council LGA is needed.
 - Increased training of Council field staff to identify NOA and the indicators of its presence is needed.
 - Council will need to identify the likelihood of encountering NOA prior to all future works (i.e. via additional geotechnical investigation) and be positioned to treat it in accordance with an appropriate AMP if encountered.
 - Improved education of the local community about what NOA can look like in the landscape is needed.

Next Steps

The next steps Council plans to undertake to assist in the safe management of asbestos include:

- Finalising the draft environmental asbestos policy which is based on the *Model Asbestos Policy for NSW* and updating the existing council employee WH&S asbestos policy based on the *Model Asbestos Policy*. The WH&S workplace asbestos policy is a separate document to the environmental asbestos policy which provides information for the community and information on asbestos in both the built and natural environments (i.e. NOA).
- Continuing to participate in training offered by LGNSW, having attended an Asbestos Management Training Workshop, the Speed Talks and Discussion Forum at Parramatta in 2014 and presented at the Naturally Occurring Asbestos Forum in Tamworth in 2015.
- Providing links from Council's website to NSW Government information on NOA.

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