

# Asbestos and Old Pipelines

By David Howell

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Asbestos coating on pipelines is not a popular topic with most pipeline companies. In fact they don't even like to use the "A" word when describing the coating if the coating is mentioned.

Asbestos as a coating on pipelines was very popular until the Clean Air Act came into being in 1965. It took a few years, but use of asbestos in new pipeline coatings disappeared before 1980. There are, however, hundreds of thousands of pipeline remaining in the ground with significant amounts of asbestos as part of the tar and felt coating. These lines were laid between 1920 and 1980. It is a proven effective and durable means of protecting steel pipe from corrosion and the elements. For the most part, the asbestos might be five to fifty percent of the felt wrapping around a length of line pipe with some tar type outer wrapping. Overall this might mean there is as much as 20% asbestos in the complete coating.

Most of the scare over asbestos comes from exposure in an enclosed area such as wall and ceiling insulation in schools, offices, and public buildings. When asbestos becomes dry and broken up, it is in a friable state and can be a contaminant if inhaled consistently by humans over time in concentrated amounts. The issue usually comes down to whether or not the asbestos in question is "friable" or free flying and dry.

In my opinion, there is no problem with asbestos on pipelines. It is never in a friable state while on the pipeline and when a pipeline is cut and removed from the ground, the coating is only minimally disturbed. At that time it is almost always in open spaces such as a pipeline right of way where it is impossible to have any concentrated exposure. Any workers would only have exposure for minutes in days on jobs of short duration. Even so, responsible operators will use respirators as part of standard safety equipment. In addition the use of dampeners is part of the process to keep the material from becoming friable.

Pipeline recyclers such as Pipeline Equities will remove pipelines, load out trucks and transport the coated pipe to a certified asbestos cleaning service. In other cases, the company will clean the pipe at their location using certified and trained personnel and supervisors for the task.

Pipeline Equities keeps certified contractor/supervisors on any job where asbestos is or might be an issue. In addition, tests are always made of pipeline coating to determine if asbestos or any other potentially hazardous material might be present.