

H B 5 deals with asbestos hazard

by Lawrence D. Weiss, Ph.D.

Executive Director

Alaska Health Project

House Bill No. 5 is the unassuming designation for one of the most exciting pieces of legislation ever designed to protect the health of Alaska workers, school children, and the staff of Alaska public schools and the University. This bill mandates a close working relationship between the industrial hygiene inspectors of the Department of Labor, experts in industrial hazards such as asbestos, and the Department of Education and school officials.

The first section of this bill establishes an "Asbestos Health Hazard Abatement Program" to deal with the potential dangers of asbestos, a cancer-causing mineral, in Alaskan schools. The program is established in the Department of Labor to coordinate efforts of state departments and agencies to abate asbestos health hazards in public schools and the University of Alaska.

The program kicks into effect whenever there is any construction, demolition, repair or maintenance in these public schools involving asbestos. The Department of Labor has some very specific duties it must perform under these new regulations. These include:

- *inspect school buildings to determine if there is any asbestos in them, and determine the potential danger of the asbestos;

- *take samples of suspected asbestos for further testing;

- *cooperate with the Department of Education to administer state money appropriated for asbestos abatement;

- *review and approve all asbestos abatement projects for adequate worker training and protection;

- *coordinate efforts by state departments, agencies and school officials to identify and abate asbestos health hazards; and

- *oversee an employee certification program.

This latter point is a very important one. House Bill 5 mandates the Department of Labor to establish guidelines to ensure that a worker involved with asbestos building materials is trained to do the work safely, and is informed about the potential dangers of the substance. Furthermore, the DOL is responsible for reviewing the training programs by contractors, unions, and other organizations to see that they are up to snuff.

Every contractor's training program must pass the DOL approval and certification procedure, and every worker must be certified as having been trained in an approved program before even an ounce of asbestos is removed or in any way altered by anyone.

Finally, the teeth. According to previously existing laws both nationally and in Alaska, it is the responsibility of the employer to insure a safe workplace. House Bill 5 provides fines up to \$1,000 for contractors who violate various sections of this new law.

Want to know more? It may be a bit early now for rock solid answers, but call the Department of Labor Occupational Health and Safety Program for more information (264-2594). They are currently writing the regulations for this new piece of legislation, and

will soon be hiring two inspectors just itching to go out and inspect your children's schools. While you are at it, contact your local school officials and find out what their plans are to have the schools inspected. This is a good law. Let's use it.