

Testing of miners, spouses in study completed

1,800 checked in respiratory part of project

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Published: Thursday, October 21, 2010 10:50 PM CDT

ST. PAUL — Sampling in the respiratory study of Iron Range taconite workers and spouses has been completed.

A total of 1,300 former and current workers and 500 spouses has been tested, with the last portion on the North Shore done by the study's completion date of Oct. 15, Diana Harvey of the University of Minnesota School of Public Health said Thursday.

“We feel we've got a great sample,” Harvey added.

The respiratory study is one of five being done as a research project by the U of M School of Public Health on what health risks there may or may not be by working in the industry, or if dust or asbestos-like fibers may be a factor. A higher-than-usual rate of mesothelioma cancer cases among taconite workers has been noted previously.

The respiratory samples will now be analyzed by researchers, and results are expected to be released “some time next year,” Harvey said.

The respiratory testing, which began at the Virginia Regional Medical Center in August 2009, ended this summer and was extended for a short time to the Bay Area Health Center in Silver Bay to cover persons who worked or lived near the North Shore. Officials had said that a sampling of persons living on the North Shore would make the study more representative.

Workers and their spouses were randomly selected and volunteered. Persons in the study had lung-function tests, bloods samples, chest X-rays and filled health surveys.

Spouses were part of the study to determine if dust or asbestos-like fibers that wound up on miners' work clothes that were washed and inhaled may have affected them.

Other portions of the five-part project include:

- Environmental study: Presence of airborne particulates, with analysis of air quality in communities near taconite mining facilities.
- Cancer incidence study: Assessment of taconite worker cancer rates using the Minnesota Cancer Surveillance System to determine if any higher cancer rates of all types exist, according to a School of Public Health statement.
- Mortality study: Review of some 68,000 death certificates of miners for causes of death.
- Occupational exposure: Work environment at taconite mines, and examination of levels of exposure of miners to dust or other materials.

Cooperation from many entities was especially helpful in response to the project, including mining companies, Steelworkers union locals and community groups, Harvey said. "We couldn't be more pleased with the responses across the Iron Range," she said.

The project, which began in 2007 and is funded by \$4.9 million approved by the state Legislature, is expected to take up to five years to finish.