

Panel seeking answers to taconite dust and lung diseases

By Charles Ramsay
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MOUNTAIN IRON — Experts on a health panel on cancer rates among Iron Range miners said they are making progress on a number of related studies.

The Minnesota Taconite Workers Lung Health Partnership's latest meeting Dec. 18 had about 15 persons on its panel attending.

"We have a pretty good idea on how we're going to do this," Dr. Jeffrey Mandel, a study leader, told the audience of about the same number as the panel.

The task force has started gathering data on exposures of workers in the mines, dust particulate composition also will be looked at, he said.

The task force also has worked out agreements with all taconite producers on the Range that "allows us to work collaboratively with the mining industry," Mandel explained.

Potential effects of mining dust on communities are not the study's focus and are difficult to ascertain, he said. "Our main emphasis is on the mining industry itself."

Four health studies will be ongoing: A mortality study, which will examine data from the Minnesota Department of Health on miners and causes of death, and a cancer rate of incidence study; a respiratory health assessment of miners or retirees; and an occupational exposure study, all conducted by the University of Minnesota's School of Public Health in the Twin Cities.

Two environmental stud-

ies, including study of sediments in lake bottoms, will be conducted by the Duluth-based Natural Resources and Research Institute of UMD.

The respiratory health assessment being done in 2009 will include 1,200 active and retired miners and 800 spouses or partners randomly selected.

"We need to obtain a scientifically based sample in a meaningful way," said Ian Greaves, a medical doctor and associate professor with the University of Minnesota's School of Public Health, who is leading the lung study.

Those participating will be given a questionnaire to fill out. Physical testing will be occurring at the Virginia Regional Medical Center, with lung functions, chest X-rays, breath tests for measurement of lung scarring, and blood tests.

The lung tests are expected to start in the spring, run for six to nine months and will be funded from the \$4.9 million allocated by the Minnesota Legislature for the five year study.

Don Fosnacht of NRRI spoke on the particulate air testing now ongoing. There are samplers scattered across the Range to measure exposure, including the NRRI building in Duluth, Virginia City Hall, Hibbing High School, Keewatin Elementary School, the municipal building in Babbitt and the Fernberg site 18 miles northeast of Ely. A site in Grand Rapids is being sought. Workers have "started actively sampling across the Range," Fosnacht told the panel.

One byproduct in the data gathering process has been taking advantage of the idling of Keewatin Taconite to obtain a base sampling of conditions without the plant operating, due to the "unfortunate economic conditions," Fosnacht said.

Dean John Finnegan Jr. of the U of M School of Public Health remarked that the task force had some of the best scientific experts from around the country on board. "It's going to be the best effort to this point," he said.

During a question-answer period, Joe Scholar of Virginia asked if testing of water supplies would be done, particularly on open-surface mine pit sources for Virginia and Biwabik. He contended that taconite dust gets into the water, and sources such as tailings basins leak a lot.

Dave Trach, a steelworker retirees director and former official in the LTV Steel Mining local, noted that he's "still excited. I think we're making some real progress."

The partnership started studies in summer 2007 to investigate any connections in the 58 deaths from mesothelioma among Range mine workers between mining dust and cancer or other diseases.

The partnership has a toll-free line staffed by a nurse to answer questions at 1-888-846-7590, and a Web site at www.sph.umn.edu/lunghealth. Emails can be directed to Dean John Finnegan at the U of M School of Public Health at sphdean@umn.edu.

