

# Sumas Mountain / Swift Creek Asbestos Cluster Investigation Summary

## Background

The Washington State Department of Health completed a follow-up epidemiologic cluster investigation in October 2009 after learning that the extent of naturally occurring asbestos deposited along the Sumas River in Whatcom County, Washington, was greater than previously thought. This investigation included the area around Swift Creek and the Sumas River up to the Canadian border. The source of the naturally occurring asbestos is an active landslide on Sumas Mountain.

In communities where contaminants like naturally occurring asbestos have been found, the department is responsible for ensuring that the community has the best information available about associated health issues. The purpose of this investigation was to assess whether the rate of lung and bronchial cancer and mesothelioma among people living in the study area was greater than the overall rate for Washington State or whether it was no different from what would be expected by chance alone.

## Investigation

The number of people diagnosed with lung and bronchial cancer and mesothelioma from 1992 through 2006 was obtained from the Washington State Cancer Registry. These data were adjusted to account for differences in the age distribution of the populations. The adjustment was necessary since the rate of these cancers increases with age. The rates of cancer in the study area were compared to rates for Whatcom County and Washington State.

## Conclusion

The results of this investigation do not suggest that the naturally occurring asbestos in the Swift Creek and Sumas River study area has contributed to an increased rate of lung and bronchial cancer or mesothelioma among people living in the area when compared to rates in Whatcom County or Washington State. However, these conclusions were based on available data and current investigation methods, both of which have limitations. These are described in the full report. Because of these limitations, *the department continues to recommend that people reduce or eliminate their exposure to naturally occurring asbestos associated with Swift Creek and the Sumas River* (<http://www.doh.wa.gov/ehp/oehas/consults.htm#Whatcom>).

## Next Steps

Continue to educate community members about the potential for exposures to asbestos and related health risks. Although there is no indication that naturally occurring asbestos in the Swift Creek and Sumas River study area has contributed to an increase in the occurrence of lung and bronchial cancer or mesothelioma among the people living in the area, asbestos is known to be a cancer causing contaminant. Therefore, it is important for people in the community to continue to take steps to reduce their exposure to the naturally occurring asbestos.

If you have questions regarding this epidemiologic cluster investigation, please contact Nancy West at 1-877-485-7316 or [nancy.west@doh.wa.gov](mailto:nancy.west@doh.wa.gov).