

# United States Senate

August 9, 2016

The Honorable Thomas L. Tidwell  
Chief  
United States Forest Service  
1400 Independence Ave, SW  
Washington, DC 20250-1111

The Honorable Gina McCarthy  
Administrator  
Environmental Protection Agency  
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20460-1101A

Dear Chief Tidwell and Administrator McCarthy:

As we reach the height of wildfire season in Montana, I am writing with concern about the unique challenges posed by asbestos contamination in and around the former W.R. Grace vermiculite mine in Libby, Montana. I appreciate the work the Forest Service and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have done to date to prepare and address cost-sharing, but I am concerned that significant risk remains should a large wildfire break out near the site.

As you are well aware, a wildfire in this area would put firefighters and residents in Libby, Troy and elsewhere in northwestern Montana at risk of exposure to asbestos. Asbestos fibers can be found in the trees, litter material, and soil in the mine and in thousands of acres of adjacent federal forest land managed by the Forest Service. For decades, asbestos-laden dust traveled through the area from the vermiculite mine once operated by W.R. Grace. These fibers can become airborne during a wildfire and potentially have devastating long-term health impacts for those living and working in the area. The health impacts from asbestos are unfortunately well known to the residents of Libby, who have disproportionately suffered from asbestos-related diseases due to W.R. Grace's negligence. While the Forest Service has been able to extinguish a number of small fires in this area in the past limiting the spread of fire and threats to health, it is critical that we contain the threat of airborne asbestos in the future.

Given the unique nature of the risk, I want to work with you, the State of Montana, local communities, and public health experts to address the potential for further public health threats in the area. I appreciate that the Forest Service and the EPA have proposed a joint plan for fire preparedness for Operable Unit 3 at the site and that the EPA will share in the preparedness expenses. It is also important that W.R. Grace is appropriately held accountable for the significant additional costs associated with fire preparedness at the site.

I have a number of specific concerns and ask that you provide responses to the following questions:

- Does the Forest Service have sufficient equipment and firefighting personnel to ensure the necessary level of preparedness to protect of the residents of Libby and surrounding areas in the event of a large wildfire? Do you need additional resources or authorities from Congress?

- Can you provide an update on coordination and information sharing with local officials regarding the potential effects of wildfire at the mine site?
- What are the health risks to local communities and how many people might be affected by airborne asbestos in the event of a large wildfire? Are you working with public health experts in the area, like those at the Center for Asbestos Related Diseases (CARD) in Libby?
- Are you getting cooperation and resources from W.R. Grace?
- Can you provide an update on long-term efforts to reduce fire risk in this area? What challenges do you face in conducting hazardous fuel reduction treatments in the area?

Residents of Libby and Troy have been forced to endure any number of hardship because of W.R. Grace's negligence. They deserve to know that the work they have put into remediating their communities will not be undone by an insufficient fire response. These Montanans should not have to live with the uncertainty that they might be exposed to hazardous levels of asbestos due to lack of capacity to effectively suppress fires at the site. I appreciate your attention to this matter and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Jon Tester