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EPA agrees to study health effects of coal tar

Tony Tucci 16.SEP.09

At the repeated urging of U.S. Congressman Lloyd Doggett (D-Texas), the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has begun a study of both the aquatic and human health hazards caused by coal tar sealants.

The studies could provide an answer to whether cancer-causing coal tar sealants used on school playgrounds, parking lots and driveways throughout Travis County are a danger to human health.

Rep. Doggett said he has been seeking information from the EPA about the coal tar issue since 2002, when the city of Austin expressed concerns that runoff from areas sealed with coal tar was contaminating waterways. The city banned the use and sale of coal tar sealants in 2006.

Coal tar, a byproduct of the steelmaking industry, contains polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), described by the EPA as "highly potent carcinogens that can produce tumors in some organisms even at single doses." Asphalt based sealants are considered a much safer alternative.

While coal tar usage has been banned in the city since 2006, hundreds of coal tar paved areas still exist. Also, there is no regulation of coal tar sealants outside the city.

"I urge the EPA to commission the National Academy of Sciences to perform a national study and report on the extent to which the presence of coal tar sealants leads to increases in PAHs in local water sources, and the effects of exposure on humans and our ecosystems," Doggett said in a letter to the EPA.

Again this year, Doggett wrote a letter to the EPA, chastising previous administrations for failing to act. He said he included language in the House Appropriations Bill for the past two years requesting an EPA study, but no action was taken.

"My hope is that with a new Administration we will see progress on many fronts where there has been none, including on this request," Doggett wrote.

This time Doggett received a response stating that the EPA's Office of Research and Development will research the impacts of PAHs on aquatic and human health beginning late this year, with preliminary results expected in 18 months.

In addition, EPA has done a human health assessment that is now under peer review. "The assessment is expected to be available for public comment in late 2009," the EPA letter said.

"We're very pleased with EPA's decision," said Thomas Ennis, division manager of the City's Watershed Protection and Development Review Department. "It's long overdue". Oak Hill Gazette