

Almost 100 workers infected by rare fungal disease at paper mill in Escanaba, Michigan

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Are you a Billerud worker or a resident of Escanaba? Contact us using the form at the bottom of this article to help expose this outbreak. We respect anonymity.

Almost 100 workers at Billerud Paper Mill located in Michigan's Upper Peninsula are being afflicted by a rare fungal disease called blastomycosis, with a dozen requiring hospitalization.

The number of identified fungal cases associated with the Escanaba mill has grown rapidly—from 53 to 81 cases in just a week. As of March 31, there were 19 confirmed cases and 74 probable cases.

While the source of the infections has not been established, only mill workers have been infected. Should the probable cases be confirmed later, this incident would be the largest blastomycosis outbreak in United States history. Until now, the largest outbreak of blastomycosis was in Wisconsin in 2015 where it affected 55 people and killed 10.

Some of the potential sources for the infection include soil, rotting leaves and decaying wood, the latter of which could easily be found in a paper mill.

According to a press release from the company, “roughly a dozen employees” have been hospitalized “to one degree or another” due to the disease, including at least one employee who has required hospitalization for weeks. The workers who exhibited early symptoms were treated initially for bacterial pneumonia—it took additional testing by medical personnel to discover the blastomycosis.

Blastomycosis infection is caused by breathing in microscopic fungal spores from the air, according to the US Centers for Disease Control. It does not spread from person to person or between animals and people. Symptoms include cough (sometimes with blood), fever, chest pain, difficulty breathing, night sweats, fatigue, weight loss, muscle aches and joint pain.

Treatment for the disease includes antifungal medications, often requiring courses of treatment lasting six months to a year. The National Institute of Health states, “With appropriate treatment, blastomycosis can be successfully treated without relapse; however, case-fatality rates of

4%–22% have been observed. Although spontaneous recovery can occur, case-patients often require monitoring of clinical progress and administration of drugs on an inpatient basis.”

There is evidence to support that exposure to the SARS-CoV-2 virus results in a weakened and dysregulated immune system, which suggests the blastomycosis infection could become more serious for those who have had COVID-19.

The public health officer of Delta County, Michael Snyder, says Blastomycosis is “exceedingly rare,” but Michigan's Upper Peninsula is a known risk area for blastomycosis infection due to its location. The blastomyces fungal spores inhabit the eastern US and parts of Canada. In states that track blastomycosis, reports indicate only about one or two cases per 100,000 people a year.

Brian Peterson, the vice president of operations at the mill, issued a perfunctory statement, saying “the health and safety of our Escanaba workers is our first priority.” Pointing out that the source of the infection had not been established, he claimed the company “continues to take this matter very seriously.” Management claims it has done a “deep cleaning” of the mill.

Considering that the disease cannot be spread from person to person, the rapid spread of the infection amongst the Billerud workers indicates that blastomyces fungal spores most likely exist in various locations inside the mill.

The blastomycosis cases are “throughout the mill...We aren't sure where the exposure is coming from,” United Steelworkers Local 21 union president, Gerald Kell told the *Detroit Free Press*. “It's not clear whether more workers are contracting the disease, or whether more are exhibiting symptoms from the same exposure.”

The USW has 670 members at the plant. Neither the USW or the other unions at the plant, the Teamsters and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), have demanded the mill be closed and their members fully compensated until the factory is made safe.

Instead, the USW held a pancake fundraiser, which raised a little more than \$30,000. According to NLM, the average

cost of hospitalization for treatment is an estimated “\$20,000; that is likely less than the current true cost.”

Workers and residents have been speaking out about the outbreak on social media. According to a TikTok video posted by area resident @alymaebenot, “last I heard, they were refusing the workman’s comp claims for these workers.”

In a Facebook post, resident Shelley Hewitt shares the firsthand account of a sick employee’s family member:

“Within one month, I’ve watched my husband almost lose his life, spend 22 days at the hospital in Green Bay struggling to live, and lose 30 pounds from this fungal infection, blastomycosis, that he caught at his job!...The damage to multiple families this is affecting will just keep growing. Insurance companies are denying patients diagnosed the proper treatment upon discharge and the medication is required for 6 months at minimum, which costs \$400.00 and hundreds more out of pocket for a 30-day supply...I have spoken to Infectious Disease doctors in Wisconsin who have confirmed this will take up to a year to recover from for my husband it cost \$9,000 per day [that he] was in the hospital, we were there for 22! Billerud is going to start denying their employees workman’s comp as well, claiming these employees can’t prove they caught these infections at Billerud even though there is not 1 cas[e] outside this Paper Mill...Billerud almost cost my husband his life, along with the others who have a long road ahead of them of recovery!...Spread the word to your loved ones, they can not and will not sweep this under the rug!”

In a letter to the editor of the *Escanaba Daily Press*, Leonard Menary wrote, “For the past month and a half, we as a community have heard about the unsafe conditions of working at the Billerud Paper Mill...The cases of people contracting blastomycosis and the long-term effects this will have on these people’s families are saddening... The lack of transparency can be scary to not only the families of mill workers but everyone in Escanaba.”

The Billerud mill is the largest manufacturing employer north of Midland in the state of Michigan, according to the Michigan Economic Development Corp. It is owned by the American Subsidiary of Billerud AB, a Swedish pulp and paper manufacturer. In a city of roughly 12,000 residents, the 2,200-acre plant has almost 900 employees—making it a major employer that sets the conditions of life for workers in

the area. The mill boasts an estimated \$360 million in annual profit.

In January of this year, the state House and Senate both passed a supplemental spending bill that included \$200 million for improvements at the Billerud paper mill, with Governor Whitmer signing the state senate bill just a few days later. In response to the passing of Senate Bill 7, Republican representative Greg Markkanen said, “This is the state fulfilling its obligation to the paper, cardboard and timber industries, and to the hard-working folks in the UP.” The representatives from Billerud stated they were planning to spend \$1 billion in upgrades.

Paper mill workers continuously face health threats despite the \$422 billion revenue the industry generates. Paper dust is highly combustible and can lead to dust explosions at manufacturing facilities. Pulp and paper manufacturing can also be very hazardous due to massive weights and the maneuvering of pulpwood loads. Workers can get hit or crushed by loads or suffer lacerations.

Public Health Delta & Menominee Counties, along with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, continue to investigate the outbreak. At the request of Billerud, the local and state agencies were joined by federal investigators from the National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health (NIOSH) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for a health hazard investigation at the mill on March 27 and 28.

However, federal and state agencies like the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) have a track record for placating workers with the illusion of transparency in order to suppress workplace struggles.

In 2021, OSHA’s median penalty for killing a worker in the US was \$9,753. Far from being a “deterrent,” this is a blank check for corporations to maintain unsafe conditions and relentlessly increase exploitation. Upwards of 120,000 deaths are caused by chemical exposures and other occupational illnesses.

Workers in Escanaba should contact the WSWs using the form below to expose the outbreak at Bellerud and get help building a rank-and-file committee to fight for workers’ control over safety.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact