

Australia: Asbestos contamination found in public spaces across Sydney

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In recent weeks, asbestos has been detected in mulch at more than 40 sites across Sydney, Australia's most populous city. The toxic material has been found in numerous parks and railway stations as well as schools, hospitals, shopping centres and at least three private residences.

Asbestos is a hazardous and carcinogenic building material that was in widespread use in Australia until the late 1980s. While the health risks, especially to workers, were known to manufacturers decades earlier, use of the material was not completely banned until 2003. Thousands of Australians have died from mesothelioma, lung cancer and asbestosis as a result.

The recent discoveries of contamination began in early January, when suspicious material was found by community members in a newly built park at Rozelle in the city's inner west and reported to Transport for New South Wales (NSW).

This sparked an investigation by the NSW Environment Protection Authority (EPA) and the state Labor government. Initially, attempts were made to dampen down public concern, with official assertions that only lower risk bonded asbestos, in which the dangerous fibres are kept in place by other materials, had been found.

But the expansion of testing across the city led to the February 13 discovery of more dangerous friable asbestos, which can easily be crushed into a powder, become airborne and be inhaled, at Harmony Park in the inner-city suburb of Surry Hills.

As well as numerous parks across the city, the material has been found at two hospitals, three supermarkets, sporting facilities and multiple railway stations on the Bankstown line.

The list of contaminated sites now includes at least five schools, including St Luke's Catholic College in Western Sydney, which has been forced to institute remote learning for its roughly 2,000 students as a result.

It has also been found at Nowra, on the NSW South Coast, suggesting that the contamination could be spread more widely across the state.

Today, the Australian Capital Territory government confirmed that potentially contaminated mulch was sold to 24 companies and 27 addresses in and around Canberra over the past year, although no asbestos has been found in the nation's capital at this stage.

The EPA claims the affected mulch can be traced back to Greenlife Resource Recovery and its waste facility at Bringelly in Sydney's south-west and has locked down the site.

EPA tests of nine mulch and three soil samples from the facility in January showed no asbestos, but a spokesperson for the authority said it was "concerned about mulch that was manufactured and sold between March and December 2023 and is no longer on site."

The company has denied responsibility, noted that there are multiple points in the supply chain in which contamination could have occurred and that the asbestos could have been present at the sites before the mulch was delivered. Greenlife declared in a statement: "Many of the sites the mulch is delivered to are remediated sites, meaning those sites have had asbestos buried there many decades ago."

The Bringelly site has previously been the subject of four EPA clean-up notices under its previous owner, Hi-Quality Waste Management. According to an investigation by the *Sydney Morning Herald*, these include a notice in 2016 when EPA officers discovered asbestos fragments, along with other pieces of non-plant matter such as concrete, mixed into stockpiles supposed to contain only soil and rocks. A penalty notice was issued in 2017 and more asbestos was discovered in 2020, mixed in with other waste material.

Greenlife purchased the site in 2022 and a representative from Hi-Quality Group stated that the

company engaged an auditor approved by the EPA before the sale to assess site conditions, ensuring it met the criteria for sale.

Greenlife said that multiple independent tests of the mulch used at Rozelle were ordered by the contractor in charge of the development, John Holland, and were cleared each time. Greenlife also stated that two other mulch samples were collected in October and November last year, tested by an independent lab and cleared.

This limited and opaque testing process, entirely under the control of the corporations that stand to lose if any contamination is found, is nevertheless more than what is legally demanded. The EPA requirements for testing of mulch call merely for a visual inspection to confirm the material does not contain any extraneous matter.

With the recent discoveries drawing attention to the issue of asbestos contamination, it has become increasingly clear that dangerous practices in the production of recycled landscaping material have been known about and ignored by regulators for years.

An investigation by the *Guardian* revealed that the EPA has known for more than a decade that soil fill made from construction and demolition waste, called “recovered fines,” failed to comply with the authority’s rules resulting in products containing asbestos and lead.

A 2019 internal investigation by the EPA revealed that waste processing companies were able to bypass regulations by simply requesting that new samples, provided by the companies, be tested after a problem is identified. The report found that 43 percent of all waste facilities in the state had requested retesting after they received a breach notice.

After dangerously high levels of lead were detected in samples from one facility, five additional samples were sent before one was found that contained an acceptable concentration. The earlier tests ranged from 10 to 20 times the acceptable limit.

In NSW, more than 700,000 tonnes of recovered fines are produced each year for projects ranging from landscaping to sporting grounds, parks and residential facilities. Legally, facilities are not required to independently test for asbestos and only 29 percent were doing so according to the 2019 investigation.

Retesting as a means of sidestepping regulations has been recognised by the EPA since at least 2013, when another internal investigation revealed the practice.

Jason Scarborough, a former senior officer at EPA who was involved in the 2013 report, told the *Guardian* on Sunday the contamination crisis was “destined to

happen.”

Scarborough said he was at a loss as to why several suggested reforms had not been implemented, citing the substantial evidence collected by “objective, science-based, and risk-focused” EPA officials during the 2013 and 2019 investigations.

“They were going down a pathway [of reform] that made sense but then suddenly to do a complete about-face with essentially zero explanation other than ‘we’ve heard what industry had to say about it’—it’s unusual,” he said.

In other words, when waste management and construction companies complained that tighter regulation would hurt their profit margins, any move to improve the health and safety of ordinary people was quickly dropped.

The revelations about soil testing point to the fact that the current mulch incident is likely just the tip of the iceberg. The immediate move by Labor and the EPA to pin sole responsibility on a single company is an attempt to cover up both the scale of the problem and the role of successive Labor and Liberal-National governments in allowing it to develop.

That so much asbestos is present in building waste is a product of the fact that its use was allowed long after its harmful properties were well known in order to protect the profits of manufacturers and the building industry.

It also points to the completely inadequate regulation of demolition and the disposal of asbestos and other dangerous materials. The process is not treated as a health and safety issue, but an opportunity for profit for private entities, creating a financial incentive for corners to be cut and costs to be slashed.

The discovery of asbestos across Sydney’s public spaces and amenities is a stark example of the capitalist subordination of basic social and health needs to the profit demands of major developers and other big business.



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