

Oregon DEQ fines fire department for intentionally burning home with asbestos inside

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MONMOUTH, Ore. — It was supposed to be a training exercise to help firefighters save lives, but instead, it may have put more people at risk and left a local fire department with a hefty fine to pay.

In January, Polk County Fire District No. 1 burned down a Monmouth home as part of a training exercise, known as “burn to learn.” The property owner, 3G’s Construction, asked it to demolish the home.

“We conduct these live fire training exercises once or twice a year, potentially, to give our firefighters live fire experience,” said Neal Olson, deputy chief with Polk County Fire District No. 1. “We acquire structures, we can burn them at the property owner’s request, get our personnel in, and let them see what fire is like. It is so much different than a classroom environment.”

Two months later, a neighbor told DEQ there may have been asbestos in the building. Investigators went back to take samples and found asbestos in the vinyl flooring and flooring mastic.

Exposure to asbestos is known to cause lung cancer and other respiratory problems.

“DEQ regulates the handling and disposal of asbestos. That’s to protect human health and the environment. There is not a known safe level or exposure for asbestos,” said Katherine Benenati, a spokesperson for Oregon DEQ.

Under Oregon law, someone should have completed an asbestos survey and removed the asbestos before burning the home.

“They didn’t do an asbestos survey at all -- then burned the building,” said Benenati.

Polk County Fire was issued a \$14,400 fine and 3G’s Construction was fined \$16,870 for asbestos-related violations.

According to a statement from DEQ, they both “failed to hire an accredited inspector to conduct an asbestos survey of the home, failed to remove material containing asbestos, and failed to hire a licensed asbestos abatement contractor to properly remove and dispose of material that contained asbestos.”

The statement also said, "Burning the materials could have released asbestos fibers and exposed workers and the public to asbestos."

Fire Chief Ben Stange told KATU News he was upset to learn their volunteers were potentially exposed to asbestos.

Olson says the fire district had no idea there was asbestos inside. He said it is on the property owner to clear the building for demolition.

3G's Construction would not comment on the fine. It said it may appeal.

"I think it's a really heinous error on their part for not checking in the first place," said Wes Tucker, who lives next door.

"I don't want asbestos in my air, probably just as much as the next person," said Alexa Mohr, who also lives nearby.

Olson says they notified everyone who may have been exposed and told them about the potential risks. He said this is a learning experience, and they have changed their protocol when agreeing to burn down a home.

Data provided by Oregon DEQ shows it has handed out more than 400 fines related to asbestos since 2003. At least four of those fines have involved fire departments.

Polk County Fire and 3G's Construction have until Aug. 27 to appeal the fine.