

Dealing with naturally occurring asbestos during a main street upgrade

COUNCIL NAME

Gundagai Shire Council

WEB ADDRESS

gundagai.nsw.gov.au

SIZE

2,457 square kilometres

POPULATION

3,747

Overview

In March 2015, Gundagai Shire Council started a \$4 million dollar upgrade of its main street. This already complex project became even more challenging when it was confirmed that asbestos occurred naturally in the landscape. In 2014, naturally occurring asbestos (NOA) was identified from other excavations in the main street. Generally, SafeWork NSW's NOA advice suggests redirecting excavation away from NOA if possible. However in this case it was hard to deviate away from the NOA as the main street is located over NOA, on the side of 'Asbestos Hill'. Gundagai Shire Council's challenge was to deliver the main street upgrade project to the community while also preventing exposure to asbestos of workers and members of the public.



Figure 1. Naturally occurring asbestos in Gundagai.

Background

The community desired the amenity and appearance of the main street (Sheridan Street) be enhanced to increase its attractiveness and provide an appealing and accessible CBD (as noted in the Community Strategic Plan). A main street upgrade would beautify the town, revitalise the business community, enhance the green space, incorporate public art and interpretation and improve traffic flow and pedestrian safety.



The presence of NOA was one of the most significant risks of the project that had the potential to impact both workers and members of the public. Council was aware that the community would be worried about their own safety.

Gundagai Shire Council needed to develop a NOA management plan and procedures on how to work with NOA in order to upgrade the main street. Clauses 431 - 434 of the *Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011* (NSW) require that the person with management or control of a workplace must manage the risks to health and safety associated with NOA at the workplace.

Implementation

Council needed to determine the extent and type of NOA in order to develop plans and procedures to control exposure to NOA. Council conducted research and consulted other councils, representatives from Local Government NSW and SafeWork NSW. When Council investigated NOA management plans, it found that other plans mainly dealt with NOA after it had been unexpectedly disturbed. Whereas for Gundagai Shire Council, Council was aware the asbestos occurred in the landscape and that there was a need to disturb it in order to complete the works. At the time, Council found that there was very limited useful information available relating to NOA (in early 2015, prior to information becoming available from the Heads of Asbestos Coordination Authorities and accessible via the SafeWork NSW website).

It was decided that five test holes would be excavated in the project area to determine the extent of the NOA. The results showed that only two of the five sites had material containing NOA, but the other three had rock material that was similar to the rock types that could host NOA.

Council developed its own NOA Safety Management Plan, safe work method statements and procedures for working and dealing with NOA. All Council staff and some contractors who would be carrying out work where NOA is likely to be found were trained in asbestos awareness as required by the *Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011* (NSW). Council also arranged training for a staff member to work in conjunction with an external contractor to set up and measure air quality around the work site.

Council developed a reporting procedure to keep the public up to date regarding the works and the results of air monitoring. Council worked closely with its project partners including Telstra, Essential Energy, store owners and APA Group to share knowledge, experience and procedures on NOA.

Outcomes

Council now has a robust and tested procedure when it comes to dealing with NOA in Council's excavations. Council was able to evaluate its performance by asking SafeWork NSW to review the NOA procedures and visit the work site. SafeWork NSW representatives gave positive feedback to Council.

A major achievement of this project is that many council workers are now trained and informed about NOA. Many of Council's employees grew up in the region and have lived with NOA in the landscape. These employees now know the risk involved with NOA, but are also aware of simple procedures for safely managing NOA.

Section 482 of the *Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011* (NSW) requires that a competent person undertake air monitoring where asbestos-related work is being carried out if there is uncertainty as to whether the exposure standard is likely to be exceeded. Early in the project, it was identified that air monitoring costs could cripple the project of the main street upgrade. With

air monitoring initially costing \$1000 per day, Council investigated ways it could lower these cost while still being compliant with the Regulation. Council achieved this by arranging for a Council staff member to be trained to be an Asbestos Assessor, in order to enable them to conduct the air monitoring. Council purchased its own air monitors, which eliminated the cost of \$750 per week of hiring air monitoring equipment. In the initial part of the project air monitoring was conducted on 26 days and all results were below reportable levels.

One unexpected outcome from this project is that Gundagai Council has become recognised as one of the leading councils when it comes to managing NOA. Council's WHS Officer Steve Howe, was invited by Local Government NSW to present at the NOA forums for councils run in 2015 and the 2015 Excellence in the Environment Awards Forum where this project was the Division A Winner of the Asbestos Management Award sponsored by SafeWork NSW.

Key Learnings

Council's initial review identified an area of the project that it could have done differently, that was to make arrangements to conduct its own air monitoring from the beginning. This would have avoided the need to engage external contractors and hire companies. Now that Council has a trained asbestos assessor, Council will conduct its own air monitoring when dealing with NOA and offer these services on a fee for service basis to other organisations.

It was identified that the asbestos awareness training that was held for Council staff was orientated more to asbestos-containing building materials, instead of NOA. Council is now planning to develop its own training package for NOA. Once this has been developed, Council will make it available for other Councils to utilise.

Council's main street project is still underway. A lot of excavation will occur and Council will continue to conduct air monitoring and review its procedures as necessary to safely manage the risks from NOA.

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