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ADEQ Director Owens Announces Route 66 Asbestos Initiative

PHOENIX (Oct. 1) – Arizona Department of Environmental Quality (ADEQ) Director Steve Owens announced today that the department is launching the Route 66 Asbestos Initiative to help communities along old Route 66 in Northern Arizona deal with asbestos problems.

Director Owens said that recent problems with asbestos in Winslow, Holbrook and elsewhere in rural Arizona show the need for a targeted effort by ADEQ to work with communities to address potential asbestos problems and ensure that asbestos-containing material (known as ACM) is handled and disposed of properly to reduce the risk of exposure to cancer-causing asbestos fibers.

Many older buildings and structures along the Route 66 corridor were built during an era in which asbestos was used as a fireproofing insulating material. When these buildings and structures are renovated or demolished, the asbestos can become crumbled and friable. If the asbestos is not dealt with properly, people can breathe the asbestos fibers, where they can be lodged in the lungs and result in lung cancer or other serious respiratory problems.

“This Route 66 Asbestos Initiative is modeled after our highly successful Route 66 Brownfields initiative where we have worked closely with local communities to remove old abandoned gas tanks in Northern Arizona corridor and put the properties back into productive use,” Director Owens said. “If asbestos is not handled properly during a renovation or demolition, it can present a huge risk to public health, as well as cause the site to become contaminated. Through this initiative, we will provide technical assistance to communities to ensure that asbestos is dealt with safely and properly and, if there is contamination, find ways to help the community clean up the site.”

Director Owens pointed out that ADEQ has been involved in two recent matters involving asbestos along Route 66 in Northern Arizona: (1) the clean-up of the Standin’ on the Corner park site in Winslow, where ADEQ provided technical assistance and funding to Winslow to clean up asbestos-containing rubble from a building fire, and (2) the removal of asbestos-laden debris from the demolition of a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) dormitory in Holbrook, where ADEQ issued an asbestos clean-up order to the contractor and has overseen the clean-up effort.

As part of the asbestos initiative, ADEQ has designated an outreach specialist in its air-quality division to provide technical assistance, outreach and asbestos education to rural communities. ADEQ also is adding an additional asbestos inspector and is ensuring that



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its community liaisons and staff in its regional offices are trained to help communities address asbestos-related issues.

“We want local officials to contact us if they have any questions about potential asbestos problems in their communities,” Director Owens said. “We also want them to alert us about any improper demolition or renovation activities that can present a risk of asbestos exposure to people.”

Director Owens added that the Route 66 Asbestos Initiative is part of a larger effort being conducted by ADEQ to address asbestos problems throughout rural Arizona.

“We will be working closely with rural communities all across the state, but we are focusing our efforts first in Northern Arizona,” Director Owens said.

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral that forms long, thin fibers. It became a popular building material in the early part of the 20th Century because of its resistance to heat, electricity and chemical damage and was even mixed into cement. When asbestos is disturbed, the carcinogenic fibers can be released into the air and travel great distances. Asbestos is subject to special notice, handling and disposal requirement under the law.