Asbestos removal continues; changes made in procedures

By Julie Freeman
Of the Emerald

A preliminary removal and washdown of asbestos on the south side of the Science I building was completed this weekend after several modifications were made in removal procedures, said Harold Babcock, Physical Plant director.

The $107,702 project, which began on Sept. 17 and entails the removal of the asbestos from the north and south sides of the building, was scheduled to be completed in 21 days. However, delays due to weather, inherent problems with the building and unrealistic standards set in the contract with CBB Construction Co. have made a completion date hard to predict, said Frank Crowell, project supervisor.

"Right now the project is getting to the level it should have been at from the beginning," said Crowell. "We knew a few days after the project began that some of the original standards would have to be changed," he said, adding that the modifications have been quick and easy.

The two major modifications made last week were the raising of the asbestos level within the contained work area from 0.5 to 3.0 fibers per cubic centimeters of air, and the discontinuation of the water-stripping method of removing the asbestos from the steel beams coated with the substance.

"Though we are well within any government standards (for airborne asbestos) outside the cocoon, we found that the 0.5 requirement inside the containment area was unreasonable," Babcock said.

"We bent over backwards to meet the concerns of everyone involved, but we bent a little bit too far for the contractor to do the job," he said.

Babcock said that the relaxed standards pose no added risk because the cocoon covering the south side of Science I is secured in such a way that any problem seems remote.

Two machines, which are inside the plastic cocoon, create negative pressure within the work area so that if anything should happen to the protective covering the contaminated air would not escape into the environment.

A special process allows the asbestos-contained air to be sucked out of the cocoon through filters, which remove asbestos particles and blow clean air outside the building.

The water-stripping method used to remove asbestos also had to be modified because water was entering the building through cracks that were not seen until the asbestos was removed.

According to Babcock, the asbestos coating and the wire mesh to which it is attached will now be removed together in large pieces.

The beams must still be washed down with water, but the amount of water used now is minimal compared to the amount used in the water-stripping process. Although seeping through the undetectable cracks may still occur, each section of the building that is being washed down will be evacuated to allow time to clean up any room where water does intrude.

"As long as the asbestos is wet there is no problem, but if it dries it can become airborne," Babcock said.

He added that the project will probably incur some further costs to take care of the cracks and leaks found in the building and to deal with other problems as they arise.

Crowell said work on the north side of the building should start by the end of next week, but stressed that they can only go one step at a time.

"The project is behind schedule but the new modifications should pick up some of the time lost. It is hard to predict when it will be finished but I don't think we are talking about months here," Babcock said.