

EARTH TALK™

Questions & Answers
About Our Environment

Dear Earth-Talk: I run a sorting machine at the post office, and am worried about all the paper dust swirling around the building. I asked both management and our union if this was a health or safety problem and both said no, but I'm not sure they really know. Can you set the record straight?

— J.G. Eddins, Phoenix, AZ

One of the drawbacks to the increasing mechanization of postal facilities is the increase in paper dust. The machines doing the grunt work loosen the dust and send it airborne where workers can breathe it in copiously.

Contrary to what management and the union may say, paper dust can be a hazard to postal workers, causing and exacerbating respiratory problems. Sorting machines could also theoretically disperse contaminants (such as anthrax) intentionally sent through the mail into postal facilities, further adding to the risk of the job.

"There's no federal safety standard on it, so it's a real problem," reports Bob Williamson, president of the San Francisco chapter of the American Postal Workers Union (APWU). "We've had people who have developed occupational asthma from breathing the fine dust." Other reported problems include

bronchitis, allergic reactions, migraines, bacterial infections, conjunctivitis and sore throats.

In the fall of 2008, more than 450 current and former postal employees, many in the Chicago area, signed a petition to occupational health officials and postal unions blaming health problems on paper dust fibers inside post offices. Some are seeking health benefits to pay for related medical treatment.

"I do believe that my life is going to be shortened," Delphine Howard, a former manager at two local post offices, told Chicago's ABC7 News. "I started having severe bronchitis attacks, severe asthma attacks, and severe chest pains."

Howard worked for the postal service from 1987 until 2005 when her doctor diagnosed her with "a medical condition that is affected by unclean air, dust particles and residue in volumes in her present employment areas." Several other Chicago area postal workers complained of similar symptoms as a result of ongoing exposure to postal dust.

The U.S. Postal Service (USPS) studied the issue in 1998 and found no direct link between health and postal dust, but did discover that sorting machines could send potentially carcinogenic volatile organic compounds (such as ink) and other irritants like dust mites, into the air. The USPS told ABC7 News it had "only received two direct complaints of respiratory problems in the last several years."

Diligent cleaning of the machines can help keep the problem in check. "Vacuum and wipe down the machines every day rather than resorting to the quicker method of blowing the dust off the machines and into the air," says the APWU's Williamson, adding that workers can also wear masks to minimize breathing in of postal dust and any contaminants in the air with it.

Williamson also recommends that post offices rotate their workers around to different duties to avoid perpetual exposure to potentially harmful or ag-

gravating activities. Besides dealing with paper dust, mail sorters frequently suffer from muscular-skeletal problems associated with repetitive motion strain.

CONTACTS: American Postal Workers Union (APWU), apwu.org. U.S. Postal Service, usps.com.

SEND YOUR ENVIRONMENTAL QUESTIONS TO: EarthTalk, P.O. Box 5098, Westport, CT 06881; earthtalk@emagazine.com. Read past columns at: www.emagazine.com/earthtalk/archives.php.

Former Southwest neighborhood coalition director Joy Stricker remembered

By Lee Perlman
The Southwest Portland Post

Surrounded by loved ones, Joy Stricker, the first executive director of Southwest Neighborhoods, Inc. (SWNI), died on May 16, 2009 at age 86.

A native Portlander, she graduated from Washington High School. During World War II Stricker worked on an assembly line at Marine Electric, where she met and married Andy Stricker. She later went back to school, and graduated from Portland State at age 43. She taught English at Sandy Union High School for 10 years before leaving to take the job at SWNI.

As the first director, Stricker had

to deal with a group of community groups that did not always see eye to eye, or universally accept her agency. Her low-key manner and dedication to service helped gain acceptance for the coalition. She also had a keen sense of humor, most often revealed in poetry or writing.


Sylvia Bogert, SWNI's current director, served under Stricker as Office Manager. "Joy was a mentor," she told *The Post*. "She was extremely fun to work with, and brought lots of energy to the office. She was also a brilliant problem solver. She was a good listener. She was extremely fair and honest with people, and they appreciated that."

Stricker was also a talented artist, (Continued on Page 2)

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