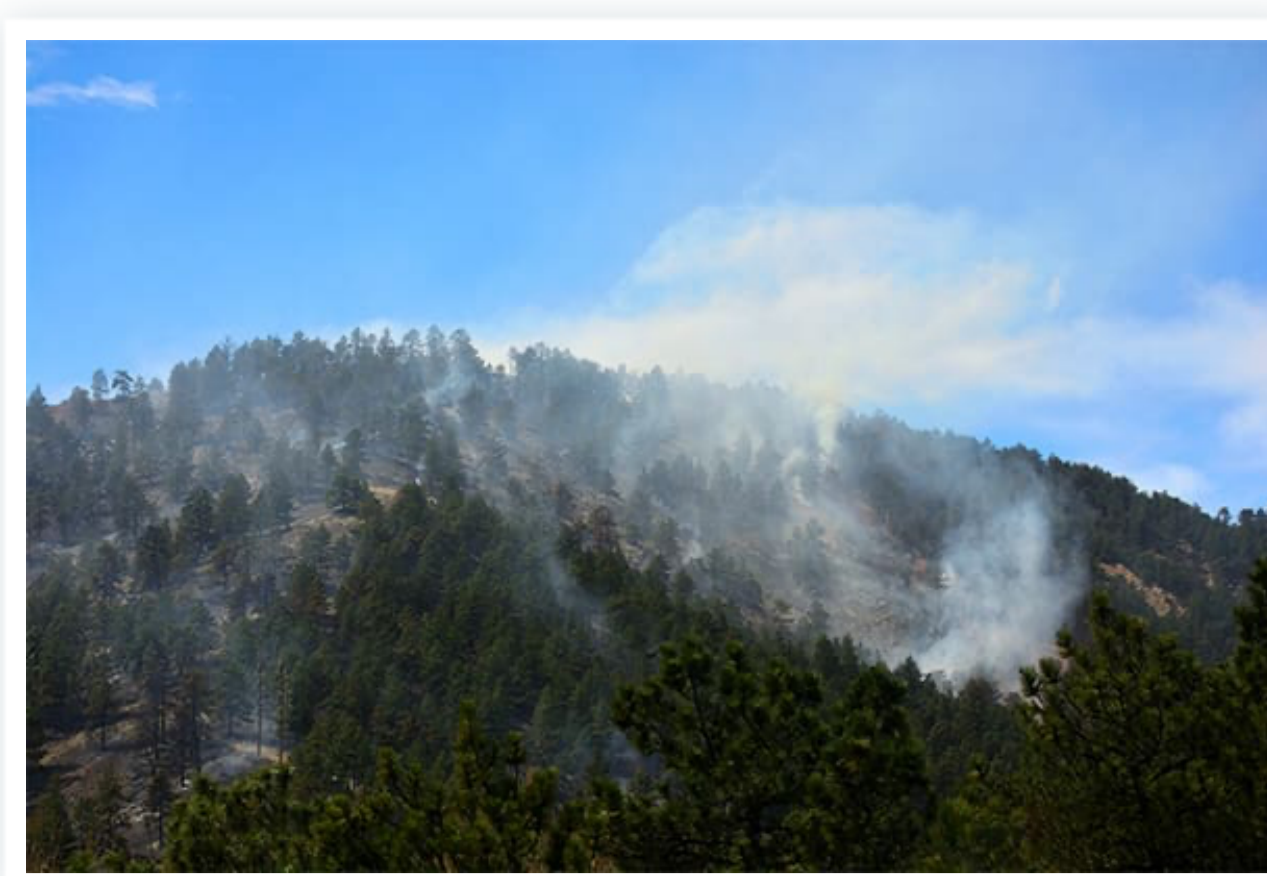


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# Wildfire in Libby Superfund Site Stokes Asbestos Fears

 Written by [Tara Strand](#) on October 19, 2023


A fire burning outside [Libby, Montana](#), earlier this year drew quick action from forestry officials. The fire started in the Libby Superfund site, a dangerous area for [asbestos exposure](#).

The Libby Superfund site is notorious for its sheer scope of damage done. More than 2,000 current and former residents have suffered from asbestos diseases due to exposure at the site. Because of the fire's potential to stir up [asbestos fibers](#) and start a new cycle of exposure, the wildfire response was decisive and quick.

## The Libby Wildfire Response

Montana Forestry members and Trust Lands Division officials believe the fire started on July 30, 2023. Officials believe a lightning strike ignited the fire, which they dubbed the Tub Gulch Fire. According to local reporters, the fire created an "aggressive response" from local officials.

A team of around 20 firefighters responded. This team had specialized training to fight fires in this part of the Superfund site. They used special respirators during operations to filter out environmental toxins. They also went through a decontamination process that took hours. During the blaze, the Lincoln County Asbestos Resource Program monitored the air for asbestos.

### The Dangers of Asbestos in Wildfires

Wildfires have obvious reasons for concern. They can impact a forest's ecosystem, injure residents and destroy neighborhoods.

But there's another danger as well. The wildfire outside of Libby added another potential risk: asbestos exposure. Fires can stir up fibers and deposit them in new areas. Airborne asbestos fibers pose a significant health threat and may not settle for days.

By August 2, the firefighting team had completely contained the fire. It burned an estimated total of two acres.

The Tub Gulch part of the Kootenai Forest is in the Operable Unit 3 (OU3) of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Superfund site. This unit includes the vermiculite mine responsible for the region's asbestos contamination.

A 2012 study detailed the extent of the asbestos contamination in the OU3 forest. The study results showed that even the trees of the OU3 forest have Libby [amphibole asbestos](#) in the bark. As a result, the area earned the nickname the Asbestos Forest.

Research from 2009 showed that nearly 90% of the asbestos in the decaying plant matter would stay on the ground. However, roughly 10% would become airborne, leading to exposure risk.

The Tub Gulch Fire was one of six fires in the area over a little more than a week. Once added up, these fires burned a total of 5.7 acres. Two other notable fires in recent years near Libby include:

- In 2017, the West Fork Fire burned more than 20,000 acres near Libby.
- In 2016, the Highway 37 Fire burned 70 acres near the Libby Superfund site.

For Libby residents, these wildfires likely add to their ongoing asbestos concerns.

## A Brief History of the Libby Superfund Site

The Libby vermiculite mine operated from the early 1920s up to 1990. While active, the mine produced 80% of the world's supply of vermiculite. Vermiculite is a mineral that was once used in some insulation, like [Zonolite](#).

The EPA placed the site on the National Priorities list for cleanup in 2002. The site has eight operable units (OUs), with the mine being in OU3. Currently, seven OUs have had remediation completed. Only OU3 remains, with an estimated completion by 2026.

[W.R. Grace](#) once owned and operated the mine. A very friable (crumbly or powdery) form of asbestos contaminated the vermiculite pulled from the mine. In April 2023, the company offered an [\\$18.5 million settlement](#) to help the EPA clean up the site.

After declaring bankruptcy, the company established an [asbestos trust fund](#) for personal injuries. It also started a separate fund to cover abatement costs.

## What's Next for the Tub Gulch Fire Area?

Unfortunately, [firefighters](#) face an increased risk of asbestos exposure whenever they enter an area that is contaminated with asbestos products. In Libby, fires are an even steeper concern as responders have to worry about fires in buildings and wildfires in the Superfund site.

The local forestry department has recruited firefighters who are properly trained and willing to work in OU3. In 2016, the EPA and the Montana Forest Service agreed to share the Libby fire protection costs.

The EPA continues remediation efforts at the Libby mine. However, the risk of wildfires in the area continues to pose a problem. Once the EPA has finished cleanup of OU3, the added asbestos exposure risks will decrease.

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