



Press Release

13 April 2023

Billerud Temporarily Idles Escanaba, Michigan, Mill

Billerud announces the temporary idling of the Escanaba Mill for up to three weeks as a precautionary measure to protect the health and safety of its employees and contractors due to a blastomycosis fungal infection outbreak.

“Our top priority now and always is protecting the health and safety of our employees and contractors who work at our Escanaba Mill,” says Christoph Michalski, Billerud President and CEO. “We care deeply about their well-being and are doing everything we can to protect them and identify and address the root cause of the blastomycosis fungal infections. As a precautionary measure, we will temporarily idle the Escanaba Mill for up to three weeks to facilitate additional proper cleaning based on recommendations from NIOSH and other organizations, which requires larger portions of the mill to be vacant while this work is performed. The financial impact is assessed to be limited since the production at the Escanaba Mill was being adjusted to meet current market demand.”

Billerud first learned of the blastomycosis fungal infections on March 3rd from the Public Health Delta & Menominee Counties (PHDM), the local health department in Escanaba, Michigan, after PHDC was notified by the local hospital of several atypical pneumonia infections in individuals who work at the Escanaba Mill. Initial testing of individuals confirmed some of these infections are caused by a fungal infection called blastomycosis. To date, there have been 21 confirmed cases and 76 probable cases of blastomycosis among Escanaba Mill workers.

Billerud’s leadership, occupational health and safety department, union leadership and mill employees have been proactively working with the PHDM, an industrial hygienist, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS), the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to investigate the outbreak.

“Although the source of the infection has not been established, and we have not received any information from the mill’s investigation, public health officials, or any

of the organizations assisting in this investigation, that indicates visiting or working at the mill is unsafe, we take this matter very seriously,” says Kevin Kuznicki, Billerud President North America. “We are following recommendations from experts at these organizations, including deep cleaning in high traffic areas throughout the mill; inspecting ventilation systems and replacing filters, and testing various raw materials coming into the mill; conducting an onsite Health Hazard Evaluation to study the health and safety of Escanaba employees with the assistance of NIOSH, CDC, MDHHS and PHDM; communicating regularly with employees, contractors and visitors, encouraging them to wear NIOSH and OSHA-recommended N95 masks and recommending they contact their local healthcare providers if they are experiencing any symptoms. The temporary idling of the mill to perform additional cleaning is another proactive step we are taking,” says Kuznicki.

According to the PHDM, the Upper Peninsula (UP) of Michigan is a known risk area for blastomycosis infection. Identifying the source can be difficult because the blastomyces fungus is endemic to the area and there has never been an industrial outbreak of this nature documented anywhere in the U.S.

Blastomycosis is a disease associated with a fungus that grows in moist soil and decomposing matter such as wood and leaves that can become airborne if disturbed. These infections are rare and most people who breathe in blastomyces will not get sick. According to the CDC, blastomycosis is not contagious and doesn't spread from person to person or between animals and people. Blastomycosis can be treated with antifungal medications prescribed by a medical provider.

More information can be found at:

<https://www.cdc.gov/fungal/diseases/blastomycosis/index.html>

For further information, please contact:

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