Asbestos in Soil Contamination

The ACT government has recently proposed mandatory training of construction workers in asbestos safety as the government responds to large projects being impacted by asbestos contamination in soil. Land owners and managers, as well as construction managers, need to be aware of the risks of unearthing soil impacted by asbestos and the proposed new legislation which will be introduced nationally to deal with such issues.

Proposed Legislation
The proposed nationally harmonised OH&S legislation is likely to prohibit the reuse and transport of soil contaminated with asbestos. No lower thresholds have been proposed in this new legislation which means even low levels of contamination will need to be treated as a prescribed waste unless it can been shown that the soil has been remediated and rendered free of asbestos materials. In all states and territories, the cost of disposal of contaminated soil to licensed landfills has increased significantly in recent years as available capacity of appropriately licensed landfills becomes increasingly scarce.

Existing Guidelines
In May 2009, the Western Australia Department of Health produced guidelines for the Investigation, Remediation and Management of Asbestos Contamination in Soil. These guidelines proposed a Health Investigation Criteria of 0.001% for asbestos fines in soil. This threshold is a level below which there is not considered to be a risk to human health.

Potential Risks
In April this year an estimated 600,000 m³ of soil at the Eastlake development site in the ACT was found to be impacted with asbestos. The cost to remove the soil was in the order of $100 million. Disposal and remediation costs of in excess of $1 million dollars are not uncommon even for small development sites.