

Asbestos and Canada

by Joan Kuyek, MiningWatch Canada, March 4, 2004

In December 2003, the Canadian delegation to the United Nations Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for an Internationally Legally Binding Instrument for the Application of the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade (PIC), resisted the inclusion of chrysotile asbestos in the list of substances. They claimed they had not had time to study it¹, and forced the organization to postpone a decision for another year. On April 1, 2004, public consultations on Canada's position² will take place.

In the same month, Natural Resources Canada granted \$775,000 over three years to the Asbestos Institute³, the lobby for "safe use of asbestos" in countries like India, Japan and Brazil.⁴

NRCAN is also behind a federal directive promoting the use of "non-friable" asbestos in federal construction projects.⁵

Here are a few salient facts about asbestos.

1. Asbestos is no longer a major generator of jobs and revenues in Canada. There are less than 950 workers employed in the mines in Quebec⁶. These are the only operating asbestos mines in Canada. They continue to function because of subsidies and loan guarantees from the federal and Quebec government and the Caisse de depots et placements du Quebec.⁷ The money that has been going into keeping these mines operating would be better spent on remediation of the dangerous tailings in Thetford and on alternative forms of economic development including agriculture in the region. The Quebec government recently announced \$2 million for economic diversification in the Region.⁸

2. In Quebec, the workers in construction and the automotive brake industry as well as miners are showing the effects of asbestos mining. The recent report of Dr. Louise Deguire for Sante-Publique in Quebec

shows that while the rate of mesothelioma in the rest of Canada is between one and two cases per million people, in Quebec for the years 1982-1996, the rate was 14.9 per million for men and 3.2 per million for women. The rate of mesothelioma for Quebec men is one of the highest in the world, exceeded only by some counties in Britain, parts of Australia and the Netherlands. Nowhere in the world is there a higher rate of mesothelioma for women than in Quebec. From 1982 to 1996, mesothelioma was diagnosed in 832 Quebecers: 655 men and 177 women. In a news report, Dr. Deguire pointed out of the 180 Quebecers who die each year in

work-related accidents about 60, or one-third, die because exposure to asbestos gave them mesothelioma, lung cancer or asbestosis.⁹

3. Although chrysotile may be immobilized in asbestos cement ("non-friable uses" as the federal directive on asbestos puts it) for up to 25 years, the cement will eventually begin to decay, and the asbestos will be released into water, air and people's lungs.¹⁰ Asbestos ce-

ment also has to be mined, milled, manufactured, transported, cut and installed. We have heard stories of people in the Third World, whose homes are built of asbestos cement, cutting their own windows and doorways, of workers up to their knees in asbestos powder, of construction workers without protection breaking up asbestos cement roads and pipes.¹¹

4. Although a recent study from the Asbestos Institute showed that chrysotile bio-degrades quickly in the lungs, there is no evidence to indicate that it is the length of time the fibre remains in the lung and not the one-time traumatic event that causes disease. Other studies have shown that some tremolite and/or crocidolite are usually present in chrysotile.¹²

5. On March 12, 2001, the WTO's Appellate Body (AB) ruled that France was justified in banning imports of goods containing chrysotile. The AB found that the French ban was justified under Article XX(b) of the 1994



A Brazilian worker opens a bag of Canadian asbestos.



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General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) – which provides a general exception to WTO rules for measures considered necessary to protect human health.¹³ In 1998, Canada had challenged the French ban on behalf of its Quebec-based asbestos industry. In the dispute, Canada argued that France's outright ban is not based on adequate science and that the ban is contrary to international trade rules. The Canadian government also argued that chrysotile asbestos was safer than many alternative products, and that was perfectly safe to use and install if adequate safety measures are taken. Canada also contended that other uses of the asbestos – such as incorporating the fibres into asbestos cement – are safe.

The EU argued that asbestos claims the lives of about 2,000 people in France each year. The EU also conducted a risk assessment of using asbestos in cement, and found that other fibres pose less of a health risk. According to trade officials, the five scientific experts consulted by the panel unanimously agreed with the

EU that chrysotile asbestos is carcinogenic and dangerous to human health.¹⁴

6. The Ban Asbestos movement is very strong internationally, and Canada is deluding itself to keep pursuing this as source of export earnings. Canada's role in supporting science and in discrediting those scientists who oppose asbestos exports is well documented, and is increasingly becoming a scandal in Europe and the developing world. The industry argues that Russia and other countries will grab the markets if Canada doesn't. This is wrong-headed on three counts: first, the markets themselves are drying up because of world-wide recognition of the dangers of asbestos in all its forms, second, because economic gain should never be an excuse for knowingly poisoning workers and their communities, and third, the accumulating costs of lawsuits from asbestos victims world-wide and the costs of caring for them will begin to outstrip any profits that may be gained from this industry.

ENDNOTES

¹ E-mail communication Bernard Made, Environment Canada to Joan Kuyek, November 14, 2003. The Canadian delegation brought forward a position that "they had not had time to prepare a national decision on chrysotile, and would prefer to have the decision deferred until a later meeting."

² contact rene.desjardins@ec.gc.ca before March 18, 2004 to participate.

³ "Le Canada donne 775 000 \$ pour le chrysotile", *Courrier Frontenac*: 2003-12-12 <http://www.courrierfrontenac.qc.ca/contenu/afficherManchette.cfm?section=Manchettes&noManchette=2830>, confirmed by Gary Nash, ADM, Natural Resources Canada, February 5, 2004.

⁴ "Backed by its board of directors, which in addition to Mr. LeBoutillier includes Messrs Clement Godbout and Gerard Potvin, Mazarin will combine forces with existing bodies to promote the Canadian chrysotile industry and the safe use of this natural resource." <http://www.stockhouse.ca/news/news.asp?newsid=2081105&tick=MAZ>

⁵ Department of Public Works and Government Services, Departmental Policy, Subject: Use of Chrysotile Asbestos, PWGSC-TPSGC 639-5 (01/2002). Obtained under an Access to Information request.

⁶ Lab Chrysotile cesse temporairement la production de la mine Bell, WEBFIN.COM" 2004-02-13; URL: <http://www.webfin.com/fr/nouvelles/nouvelles.html?id=46879> and Mine Jeffrey vise une reprise de trois mois LA TRIBUNE: 2004-02-13 URL: <http://www.cyberpresse.ca/actualites/article/4,723,0,022004,584189.shtml>

⁷ Reuters Canada, « La mine Jeffrey reprend temporairement ses activités », September 7, 2003 par Ian Bussièrès. THETFORD-MINES, Québec - La mine d'amiante Jeffrey d'Asbestos, au Québec, pourra reprendre temporairement ses activités du 15 septembre au 29 novembre en raison d'une autorisation de la Cour, a indiqué jeudi le syndic de l'entreprise. La mine, actuellement sous la protection de la Loi sur les arrangements avec les créanciers, rappellera près de 230 travailleurs pour préparer la reprise de production ...Le juge a aussi accédé à une autre requête du syndic, soit d'étendre jusqu'au 27 février le

délaï pour déposer un arrangement aux créanciers de la mine d'amiante. La mine Jeffrey traîne une dette de 115 millions\$. Son principal créancier garanti, la Caisse de dépôt et de placement du Québec, est exposé à hauteur de 59 millions\$. Le redémarrage devrait permettre à la mine de réaliser un chiffre d'affaires annuel de 20 à 25 millions\$ en demeurant rentable. La mine devrait produire 25.000 tonnes d'amiante d'ici la fin novembre, ce qui s'ajoutera à l'inventaire de 20.000 tonnes provenant du premier redémarrage, qui avait permis d'en produire 50.000. ...De plus, la Mine Jeffrey a obtenu de nouvelles concessions de la part de ses travailleurs syndiqués, qui ont renouvelé leur convention collective pour un an en abandonnant la prime de 30% qui remplaçait les avantages sociaux de l'an dernier. ..Le plus grand producteur au pays, la société minière LAB Chrysotile de Thetford Mines, fermera temporairement sa mine souterraine "Bell" du 14 septembre au 29 novembre et sa mine à ciel ouvert "Lac d'amiante du Canada" du 30 novembre jusqu'à Pâques..."

⁸ Gouvernement de Québec: 2004-01-16 <http://communiqués.gouv.qc.ca/gouvqc/communiqués/GPQF/Janvier2004/15/c0254.html>

⁹ Institut National de la Santé Publique du Québec, « Fibres d'amiante dans l'air intérieur et extérieur : Stat de situation au Québec » <http://www.inspq.qc.ca/pdf/publications/233-FibresAmianteAirInterieurExterieur.pdf>

and Institut National de la Santé Publique du Québec, « Rapport épidmiologie des maladies liées l'exposition l'amiante au Québec » <http://www.inspq.qc.ca/pdf/publications/222-EpidemiologieExpositionAmiante.pdf>

¹⁰ Castleman, Dr. Barry D. *The Fallacy of Controlled Use*, Published in *International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health* 9: 294-298 (2003)

¹¹ See *The Asbestos War - Special issue of the International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health*, www.ijoeh.com

¹² Egilman, D. "Exposing the Myth of ABC, 'Anything But Chrysotile': A Critique of the Canadian Asbestos Mining industry and McGill University Chrysotile Studies". *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*, 2003; 44:540-557.

¹³ <http://www.ictsd.org/html/weekly/story1.13-03-01.htm>

¹⁴ <http://www.ictsd.org/html/weekly/story1.20-06-00.htm>