



# MiningWatch Canada

---

## Mines Alerte

City Centre, 508-880 Wellington St., Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1R 6K7  
tel. (613) 569-3439 — fax: (613) 569-5138 — [canada@miningwatch.ca](mailto:canada@miningwatch.ca) — [www.miningwatch.ca](http://www.miningwatch.ca)

## Asbestos Mining in Canada

*A brief presented to the International Ban Asbestos Conference,  
Ottawa, September 13, 2003  
by Joan Kuyek, MiningWatch Canada<sup>1</sup>*

Thank you for the opportunity to talk about asbestos mining in Canada.

MiningWatch Canada is a coalition of 17 Aboriginal, environmental, social justice and labour organizations that advocates for responsible mining practices in Canada and Canadian companies abroad. We support communities by undertaking research, providing accompaniment and organizing exchanges, educational events and lobbying.

I have divided my talk into two sections: an overview of asbestos mining in Canada and some strategic considerations for taking on the issue here.

Asbestos mining in Canada has taken place in Québec, Newfoundland, British Columbia and the Yukon.

### Québec<sup>2</sup>

Most of the asbestos mining in Canada has taken place in the province of Québec, and at its peak, Québec had 10 of the 13 mines in Canada. Although there have been mines in other areas of Québec – including a small open pit at Putarniq in Nunavik – the Thetford Mines region is host to most of them. The largest of these was the Jeffrey Mine. Today it is the largest asbestos open pit in the world (2 km in diameter, 350 metres deep and 15.5 sq. km. in total area).

The Thetford deposit was discovered by a Welsh miner visiting in the 1870s. A gentleman farmer put up the cash for the first mine, which was opened in 1878.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The oral presentation differed somewhat from the written text here.

<sup>2</sup> Information in this section is largely drawn from the Government of Québec web site at [www.mrnfp.gouv.qc/mines/Quebec-minier](http://www.mrnfp.gouv.qc/mines/Quebec-minier)

<sup>3</sup> Ross, W. Gillies. “Encroachment of the Jeffries Mine on the Town of Asbestos Quebec” in Roy T. Bowles, *Little Communities & Big Industries*, Butterworths 1982.

The original Jeffrey mine was blasted and dug out manually with chisels from shallow pits and hillside cuts. As the pit grew a horse powered the derrick to lift the material to the surface.

By 1905, the miners were using compressed air drills and dynamite. They hand-sorted the ore and placed it in wooden buckets that were hoisted from the pit by steam-driven winches, then dumped into tipping cars that were hauled away by a locomotive. Then men and women with hammers broke up the fibres in the ore, and the bagged ore was taken to Danville by rail. This system remained in place until 1918. Johns-Manville acquired the mine that year, and they invested in steam shovels to move the ore from the pit. From 1944-1959, underground mining took place, and then the open pit was expanded.

In 1949 there was a lengthy and ferocious strike at Thetford Mines over wages and dangerous working conditions. It set off a period of political upheaval in Québec that led to the Quiet Revolution. The strike also created the context for the nationalization of large parts of the asbestos industry in 1978, as the Societe Nationale d'Amiante. The public ownership of the industry, which lasted until September 1992, was part of the "Maitres Chez-Nous" strategy to take control over the profits that were being taken from Québec by US and Canadian firms. The fierce pride that accompanied this strategy is part of the difficulty in dealing with the industry today. The industry is heavily supported by government pension funds, the trade union solidarity funds and the Québec crown corporations.

By 1967 there were ten active mining companies in the region, employing about 6200 workers, and three sizeable mining towns: Black Lake, Thetford Mines and Asbestos, with a total population of more than 35000. Both Thetford Mines and Asbestos were sited over the ore bodies.

The tailings area grew as quickly as the pit. In some towns, the houses were sandwiched in valleys created by the piles. In others, houses were moved to make way for mine expansion and tailings. Most of these tailings have never been properly reclaimed.

The period from the Thetford Mines strike to the early 1980s was prosperous for the region. Then, in the late 1970s, asbestos workers in the United States who had fallen ill sued Johns Manville for more than \$1 billion US, and the company filed for bankruptcy protection. The Jeffrey Mine became an independent business in 1983, owned by J.M. Asbestos.

Although asbestos related diseases had been recognized in Québec since 1982 as compensable, there was more difficulty with lung cancers that were atypical. In 1984, 15 miners who worked for J.M. Asbestos Inc went to court to get compensation for their lung cancer. It was fought tooth and nail by the industry, and it was not until 1998 that the Supreme Court finally decided in their favour. By then 14 of the complainants had died.<sup>4</sup>

In the late 1990s, the company invested \$60 million to develop underground mining at the Jeffrey Mine and received a \$65 million loan for this purpose of which 70% was guaranteed by the Québec government in October 1998. However, the company closed and filed for bankruptcy protection in

---

<sup>4</sup> JM Asbestos v. Commite D'appel en matière de lésions professionnelles. The case appealed was that of Clement Guillemette. File # 25617 supreme court of Canada. Also on [http://www.eye.net/eye/issue/issue\\_10.28.99/news/asbestos.html](http://www.eye.net/eye/issue/issue_10.28.99/news/asbestos.html) "Ironically, 15 miners who worked for J.M. Asbestos, Inc., one of Quebec's two main asbestos mining companies, sued for compensation in 1986 over lung cancer they'd contracted. The company fought the suits furiously. But last year Quebec's worker's injury appeal board ruled in favour of the workers. By then 14 of the 15 men were dead."

October 2002. They had 320 workers and had been producing 125,000 tonnes/year, which had been mostly sold to Asia. The Jeffrey Mine is organized by the CSN; the other two by the Steelworkers. A reprieve occasioned by a US contract for the space shuttle has kept them open for another few months,<sup>5</sup> but will mean temporary closures at Bell and Lac D'Amiante.<sup>6</sup>

Re-mining tailings for magnesium at the Jeffrey Mine was the dream of Canadian mining giant Noranda when it set up the experiment called the Magnola Magnesium smelter. An agreement was signed between Noranda and J.M. Asbestos in 1997, and construction started on the \$730 million plant in May 1998. Problems with the technical aspects of the process and vociferous opposition from local people, because of the Persistent Organic Pollutants that would be emitted during the process forced the project to be indefinitely put on hold in the spring of 2003.<sup>7</sup>

In Québec at present, with the closure of the Jeffrey Mine, there will be only two operating asbestos mines, the Black Lake and Bell Mines, both owned by LAB Chrysotile. They employ only 950 workers and export 98% of their annual production to 50 different countries, 60% of which are in Asia. Yesterday, the company announced the temporary closures of Black Lake and Bell Mines, in order to keep the Jeffrey Mine open.<sup>8</sup>

LAB Chrysotile is closely linked to the Québec government and substantially subsidized, both in terms of political support and financial contributions. As an interesting aside, statistics on wages, costs and value added for asbestos are excluded from the Canadian Minerals Yearbook as they are considered to be “confidential”. No other mineral is treated this way.

## Newfoundland<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Reuters Canada, « La mine Jeffrey reprend temporairement ses activités », September 7, 2003 par Ian Bussières. 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 délai 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...”

<sup>6</sup> Radio Canada, **Lab Chrysotile ferme ses mines**, le vendredi 12 septembre 2003. “La société minière Lab Chrysotile de Thetford Mines fermera temporairement les portes de sa mine souterraine *Bell* et de sa mine à ciel ouvert *Lac d'amiante du Canada* (Lac). La faiblesse du marché de l'amiante à l'échelle mondiale et la hausse du dollar canadien font craindre le pire aux travailleurs qui perdront temporairement leur emploi... La mine souterraine *Bell* sera fermée jusqu'à la fin du mois de novembre et la mine *Lac*, de la fin novembre jusqu'à Pâques. Cela signifie que les 250 employés et une trentaine de cadres de la première mine seront en chômage durant 11 semaines et durant 30 semaines pour les 400 employés de la seconde mine.”

<sup>7</sup> see Coumans, Catherine. A Case Study of the Magnola Smelter, MiningWatch Canada 2003.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www2.nrcan.gc.ca/india-inde/directory/labchrysotile.cfm?lang=eng>

<sup>9</sup> Paraphrased from the work of Rick Rennie, 1999, [www.heritage.nf.ca/society/baieverte.html](http://www.heritage.nf.ca/society/baieverte.html)

Asbestos mining in Newfoundland dates back to the 1890s, when two small-scale mines were established on the west coast, in the Bay of Islands and Port-au-Port areas.

The Baie Verte asbestos deposit was discovered in 1955, and Advocate Mines, a division of the giant Johns-Manville Company, began open-pit mining there in the same year. The major markets for the Baie Verte asbestos were in western Europe and South America. The mine employed up to 550 people.

In 1976, the union, a local of the United Steelworkers of America, succeeded in having Dr. Irving J. Selikoff come to Baie Verte and examine 485 mine and mill workers (97% of the work force). His report, published in 1977, indicated that 10% of those examined had asbestos-related diseases. The Selikoff report came out while the company and the union were in contract negotiations, and the union made it the centrepiece of their demands. The union insisted that the company and the government act to institute Dr. Selikoff's health and safety recommendations. When the company was not prepared to meet these demands, contract talks broke down. Brian Peckford, who was then Minister of Mines, took a similar position. The union stood firm and when no deal was reached, the workers went on strike. The strike lasted 14 weeks, and was accompanied by mass demonstrations. Women in the area were particularly vocal. Eventually, the company gave in to many of the demands, and some improvements were carried out in the areas of working and living conditions.

The Baie Verte miners' strike was significant in a number of ways, not least because it was one of the first strikes in Canada fought almost solely on the issue of occupational health and safety. By 1990, the Advocate mine shut down.

### **The Yukon<sup>10</sup>**

In the Yukon, asbestos was mined at Clinton Creek from 1967-1978, 100 km northwest of Dawson City. When the four open pits were closed, they left behind 63 Mt of waste rock, after producing 16 Mt of ore. The tailings and waste rock are now abandoned and slumping into the nearby creek. The Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, which now has responsibility for the mine, categorizes the site as "high risk". With "severe human safety risk due to failing water retaining structures of a man-made lake and failing tailings, waste rock and open pit walls." The effluent contains asbestos, aluminum, iron, magnesium, selenium and hydrocarbons. A failure of these structures will cause "flooding, destruction and sedimentation of streambeds of Clinton Creek, Forty Mile river and Yukon River. These streams are known salmon habitat."

### **British Columbia**

In British Columbia, the Cassiar asbestos mine enjoyed a 40 year history before it closed in 1992. In 1997, BC Chrysotile was incorporated to look at wet milling the tailings to look for jade, but they collapsed. In 2000, it was briefly reopened by Cassiar Mine and Metals, but it closed again in 2002. The CEO of this company was Cliff Frame, one of the principles in Westray at the time of the mine disaster there. They sold chrysotile to the Hyundai group in Korea. The mine left behind tailings 100 metres long, 300 metres wide and 85 metres high. Cassiar had a plan to mine magnesium, and possibly jade, from the tailings, but it was not feasible and the mine closed again.

---

<sup>10</sup> From files of the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs obtained under an Access to Information Request 2002.

## Strategic considerations;

Chrysotile asbestos miners face many of the same issues as other miners: technological change replacing workers, difficult management, injuries, shift work, discrimination against women and minorities, getting a fair share of the profits. The mines too, have effects beyond asbestos: high water and energy consumption, perpetual care and maintenance after closure, the *intrusive rentier* impacts on local economies. The mines, like other mines, have impacts on transportation corridors and costs, on indigenous rights in Canada and beyond, and on provincial and federal budgets.

### 1. The population of mining towns

MiningWatch recently completed the first phase of a study looking at long term impacts for mining-dependent communities.<sup>11</sup> Some of the learnings are relevant to the asbestos communities in Québec. The number of metal mining jobs in Canada in 2002 was 23,944<sup>12</sup>, dropping from a 40-year high in 1974 of 70,000. Jobs are disappearing all over, while the profits are increasingly drained to a few.

All mining is dangerous and destructive work, which carries with it a high incidence of industrial disease and accidents – cancers, white hand, silicosis, injuries – which has not been adequately compensated by Workers Compensation nor dealt with by industry or government. Many mine workers are unwell or disabled. Older workers (near retirement age) usually remain because they are attached to the community, unable to sell their house and have a settlement package of some sort. Most of the asbestos miners in Québec are at least fifty years old.

People who work for a mining company are trained to distrust their own perceptions of danger and to do what they are told to do. They are used to abdicating “management rights” about what is produced to the employer. Although most workers recognize that they will have to sacrifice their own health and strength to produce a living for their families, they do not expect that the equation will include sacrifices the health of their wives and children. I know very few miners that want their children to be miners.

Mining specialists such as engineers tend to leave the community when the mine closes. Traditionally many miners are itinerant and will leave the town once the work is gone. Often they find themselves together in another town. Management of the mines tends to create a virtual community of relationships that is in fact quite closely knit. (Cassiar employees have a virtual community at [www.cassiar.ca](http://www.cassiar.ca).) This community of engineers, managers and tradespeople also travels overseas. However, the general reduction in the number of people employed in mining makes it less likely that there will be mining work elsewhere. The average age of people working in mining has been increasing dramatically, and the industry is concerned about the lack of “new blood”.

However, many workers mix their employment at the mine with marginal farming, hunting, fishing, trapping, and other activities, and have many other skills developed through these “hobbies” The general-knowledge part of the community is more likely to stay. In mining communities there are fewer of these generalists than in fishing or forestry towns, because the work is not seasonal or part-time .

---

<sup>11</sup> Kuyek, Joan and Catherine Coumans. *No Rock Unturned*, MiningWatch Canada, 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Mining Association of Canada, *Facts and Figures 2002*, Table 15. The mining industry usually includes quarrying, coal mining and non-metal mines when they talk about employment in mining, which doubles the figure. If smelters and refineries are added to the figure, the number is increased by 20,811.

The young people – looking for opportunities and education – leave. There is a “creaming off” process involving the youth and local leadership, as they get an education and do not return home.

The impacts of mining on women has been the subject of particular study. In 2001, the Yukon Conservation Society published Gaining Ground: Women, Mining and the Environment. The result of a participatory research project and conference, the publication made a number of points relevant to this study. “Women, as members of their communities, are at the forefront of knowing how projects affect the health of the environment, families and communities... Often they are also agents who address, contemplate and cope with the social and environmental impacts of mineral resource development.”

“Mining is exploitative. So I found when I was working (in the mining community) that when you start with your sole employer – your sole role model – the leader in the communities – being that exploitative, it went right down the line.” (Yukon health worker quoted in 67) Some researchers mention the culture and social psychology particular to mining towns. Violence against women is prevalent. A culture of excessive drinking and drugs is encouraged.

After closure, the availability of cheap housing has often resulted in a number of communities having an inflow of retirees and younger people with alternative lifestyles. This kind of alternative culture is evident in Thetford Mines, where they work as artists, farmers, beekeepers and so on.

## 2. All mining is heavily subsidized.

Mining enjoys a reputation in Canada as a major generator of wealth. This is not in fact true. The wealth it does create is produced from the unpaid consumption of nature’s services: land, water, energy, and from exploiting human labour. Most mining no longer returns profits to the provincial and federal governments that subsidize it. In Québec, mining taxes are the lowest in the country, and the royalties (taxes specific to mining) are one fifth of the subsidies to the industry. Although only 6,992 people work in mining in Québec, total public expenditures on the industry are \$107.7 million. Metal mining only contributes 0.74% of Québec GDP. This is made worse by the legacy of un-reclaimed abandoned mines and tailings sites which will require care - in many cases- in perpetuity. The subsidy per job in Québec amounts to staggering \$15,390 from the Québec government and over \$13,000 from the federal government.<sup>13</sup>

The Caisse de Dépôt and Placement in Québec faces losing \$59 million if the Jeffrey Mine closes down permanently<sup>14</sup>. CDP was established in 1965 by the Québec government to manage public sector pension funds. It now manages the funds of the Regime de rentes du Québec, a pension savings plan to which all workers in Québec must contribute.<sup>15</sup> The Société de Financement du Québec (SGF) has a 20% equity investment in the Magnola magnesium smelter<sup>16</sup>.

---

<sup>13</sup> The Pembina Institute and MiningWatch Canada. Looking Beneath the Surface: an Assessment of the Value of Public Support for the Metal Mining Industry in Canada, 2002

<sup>14</sup> Reuters, op cit.

<sup>15</sup> MiningWatch Canada, op cit, page 70-1. This figure does not take into account the return to governments from taxation and royalties from the industry.

<sup>16</sup> ibid

Although some of these figures are for metal mining, they can be applied to asbestos mining too. We know for example that the federal and provincial governments combined have provided over \$54 million to the Asbestos Institute since its inception.

### 3. The cultural and linguistic divide between Québec and the rest of Canada.

The inability of English Canadians to respect and work with Québécois activists is a very serious problem. We know very little about the brilliant and effective social movements in Québec, and we have been unable to expend the energy to understand the Québec trade unions. We do not ensure that we produce materials in French or in plain language; we do not make scientific literature accessible. The communication problem is long standing and has consequences. We must address it.

As an indication of this great divide, searching the internet for information on “asbestos’ issues in Québec, turns up little of the history or the conflicts. Searching for “amiante” turns up a whole different set of information. Yesterday, while we were meeting, Radio Canada, the French public broadcaster, announced closures at the Bell and Black Lake Mines, but we were completely un-aware of this during the meeting.

We need to use community organizing and participatory research strategies to break through the calculated manipulation of truth that is being perpetrated by the Asbestos Institute and their minions, and we need to do it in French, on the ground, in those communities that are sacrificing their lives for the production of asbestos.