

# Medical associations call for ban on Canadian asbestos mining

A group of medical associations on Wednesday called for a ban on asbestos mining in Canada, which tightly restricts the use of the material but allows it to be exported despite its health risks.

The Canadian Medical Association, the Canadian Public Health Association and the National Specialty Society for Community Medicine demanded that provincial and federal governments stop funding the asbestos industry and promoting Canadian asbestos abroad.

Canada is the world's fifth largest exporter of chrysotile asbestos. Two mines in the province of Quebec account for all of the production.

Once a commonly used building material, asbestos is strictly regulated in Canada under the Hazardous Products Act and the Environmental Protection Act.

Asbestos exposure has been linked with lung and other cancers. An estimated 90,000 people die from asbestos-related illnesses every year, according to the World Health Organization.

Canada produced 180,000 tonnes of asbestos in 2009, 96 percent of which was exported to 80 countries around the world, with Asia being the primary market, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

The Canadian government, in a legal document on the website of the auditor general, said it "encouraged" countries that import Canadian asbestos to follow the 1986 Geneva conventions on asbestos use and regulation.

Provincial and federal natural resource ministers did not return telephone calls requesting comment on the proposed ban.

In India, where more than 300,000 tonnes of asbestos was imported in 2007, chrysotile asbestos is routinely used in roofing, and no license is required to import the mineral, according to *The Lancet*, a British health journal.

Jeffrey Turnbull, president-elect of the CMA, said the Canadian government does not require exported asbestos to bear a hazardous material label.

"It's a challenge to understand why in Canada we restrict asbestos as a hazardous product," said Turnbull in a telephone interview from his Ottawa office. "Yet we then will export (asbestos) to other settings across the world where there is not the same degree of health protections in place."

## MINE EXPANSION

Asbestos, Quebec is awaiting the provincial government's approval of a C\$58 million (\$54.7 million) loan guarantee to revive the privately owned Jeffrey Asbestos mine, one of the world's largest open-pit asbestos operations.

The loan, combined with a labor deal to establish a C\$10 million reserve fund from workers salaries, will provide cash to expand underground operations at the 130-year-old mine.

The expansion will create an estimated 400 direct jobs in Asbestos, a town of 6,800 located 150 km east of Montreal, and will enable the mine to produce enough asbestos to keep Canada in the market for the next 25 years.

Critics say Quebec should focus on more sustainable industries, instead of approving the loan guarantee to save the Jeffrey Asbestos mine.

"The decision is simple," said Matthew Hodge, president of the National Specialty Society for Community Medicine, in a press release. "Invest taxpayer's dollars to diversify the regions and to retrain those currently employed by the declining asbestos industry."

The owner of the Jeffrey asbestos mine, Bernard Coulombe, was not immediately available for comment.

A representative of the Chrysotile Institute, a Canadian organization that lobbies on behalf of asbestos producers around the world, was also not available for comment. (Reporting by Julie Gordon; Editing by Frank McGurty)

<http://www.mineweb.co.za/mineweb/view/mineweb/en/page72068?oid=107183&sn=Detail&pid=102055>