

STATEMENT TO EPA
BY ROCH FRECHETTE

JULY 18, 1986

Good morning. My name is Roch Frechette. I am mayor of Asbestos, Quebec, which is home of the largest open pit asbestos mine in the western world.

I have held this position for the past 8 years. I am also president of the National Committee on the Revitalization of Asbestos Mining Communities, in addition to being a member of the board of directors of SNA, a Quebec government crown corporation which has extensive interests in the asbestos mining industry. I was born in Asbestos, Quebec, and I worked for 22 years in the asbestos mines in the eastern townships of Quebec.

Having lived and worked in the eastern townships of Quebec, I perhaps more than anyone in this room today, have had the opportunity to view first hand the legacy of asbestos disease and the human suffering which has resulted from past high exposures in the workplace.

Yet, despite this tragic legacy of disease, I wish, on behalf of the citizens of Asbestos, Quebec, and all asbestos mining communities in Canada, to indicate to you today, our profound concern and vigorous opposition to EPA's proposed rulemaking to ban and phase-out the use of asbestos.

As public officials, I, and other mayors of Canada's asbestos mining communities have, as a first priority, the health and safety of our citizens. And, I can assure you Mr. Dull, that the Canadians in asbestos mining communities are more than

adequately provided for in this regard.

We know asbestos is primarily an occupational health issue and one that can be adequately controlled with today's technology. As Mr. Godbout has indicated, Canadian labour has fought hard to obtain safe working conditions. Management has responded and today, Canada's mines and mills serve as models to the rest of the world.

In addition asbestos is definitely not a public health issue. We in the eastern townships of Quebec, know that more than anyone else in the world. Our homes and playgrounds are built close to mining operations and the massive tailings piles, where waste from the mine and mill operations is discarded. The water in Thetford Mines, Quebec, contains millions of fibres per litre, and fibre concentrations in ambient air are possibly among the highest in the world. Despite what to the laymen would appear to be outrageous living conditions, the communities are confident that no excess risk is presented to our citizens. This confidence has been supported recently by a major scientific study which concluded that there is no evidence of any influence on mortality from environmental, air and water pollution by chrysotile asbestos in our mining communities.

However, this is not why I am here today. Reputable scientists such as the commissioners of the Ontario Royal Commission on Asbestos are more qualified to discuss scientific issues. I understand that they will be appearing before your panel next Thursday.

What I am here for today, is to relate to you another form of human tragedy which is fast becoming the more significant

chapter in the asbestos story: lost hope and human despair.

Mr. Dull, I want you and your panel members to be aware of the consequences of your actions. EPA's proposed ban on asbestos, which has been in the making for over 6 years now, has already undermined the livelihood of thousands of workers in Canada, torn and soiled the social fabric which binds our communities together and now threatens the very existence of Canada's asbestos mining regions, where some 70,000 Canadians currently live.

Let me give you some background on this matter. Less than six years ago, our local industry in Asbestos, Quebec, employed over 2,700 people and generated some \$50 million in revenue. The workers all enjoyed enviable working conditions as well as job security. The young could count on finding a job reasonably fast and one that offered the same safe working conditions that their parents enjoy. The economy was stable and prosperous. Unemployment was virtually unknown and holding two jobs was commonplace. Today, six years later, there are less than 800 jobs, generating less than \$20 million. Mine operations are sporadic and employees have to face several weeks of shutdown every year.

Security, comfort and joie-de-vivre have given way to insecurity, financial problems, stress and anxiety. Several families are forced to leave their favorite place to live, for they have given up hope. The same is true of all our young people. As a result, those who represent our hope for the future are gone, and the town of Asbestos has the sorry reputation of

having the highest average age of population among Quebec cities and towns. That fact may seem somewhat paradoxical to those who believe asbestos workers live short lives. Because of this exodus of our residents, those who stay behind are seeing their tax burden get heavier day by day.

Forty percent of the population is unemployed, some are living on employment insurance, many are on welfare. The alcoholism rate has climbed sharply. We also have an alarming suicide rate.

Whenever circumstances permit, I, like my fellow mayors, try to promote my locality and improve local conditions. With EPA's proposed rulemaking hanging over us like a dark cloud, you can understand that any promotion and/or publicity has proven to be an impossible undertaking, regardless of the means.

That describes the current situation in Asbestos, Quebec. Unfortunately, and with few exceptions, I know that Black Lake and Thetford Mines in Quebec, Cassiar in British Columbia and Baie Verte in Newfoundland, also face the same problems that we do. Indeed, since 1979, total direct employment in Canada's asbestos mines has dropped from 8,000 to just 3,000 people today.

If one adds to this list the other jobs which have been lost in Canadian asbestos downstream and backward linkage industries, you have the underpinnings of a severe and brutal socio-economic crisis.

We already know that this crisis, which has lasted some six years has ravaged our communities more than the human disease and suffering associated with past high exposures to asbestos. We cannot and do not accept that an American agency should make us

the scapegoat for its failure to act on much more pressing environmental problems.

We accept it all the less, for we know that chrysotile asbestos can be used safely if properly controlled. We cannot imagine continuing the use of asbestos if the health of our families were at stake. We know that today the risks related to asbestos are no greater than a myriad of other risks that workers face every day in our modern day society.

In conclusion, Canada has vast asbestos mineral reserves sufficient to provide employment and a high standard of living for generations of Canadians to come. EPA's actions on asbestos not only threaten this valuable resource, but they are causing a great deal of human suffering among thousands of Canadians who have fought long and hard to achieve safe working conditions and who know that asbestos does not pose a risk to the general public.

We do not want to see our communities sacrificed by a rulemaking which is not justified on health grounds and which appears to be motivated more by political and economic considerations. Let me repeat, the asbestos mining communities do not wish to be sacrificial lambs.

However, should the principles of objectivity, impartiality and ethics be applied, I have confidence that asbestos will emerge from these hearings with new strength and a better understanding by the American public.

**PRESENTATION TO
EPA PUBLIC HEARINGS
ON ASBESTOS:**

**Pressure Pipe Manufacture in Developing Countries
A Comparative Socio-Economic Analysis**

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Washington, D.C.**

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