

Briefing Note: Quebec Plans to Expand Asbestos Production

by Laurie Kazan-Allen and Kathleen Ruff¹

Introduction

For over a hundred years, Canada has been at the forefront of global asbestos production and marketing efforts. The respectability that Canadian involvement gives to the campaign by asbestos propagandists is an essential reason for its success. Although asbestos has been discredited by all major international agencies, scores of national governments and independent scientists, global use remains around 2 million tonnes a year.

Canada is now running out of asbestos. In order for this industry to continue, the development of new asbestos resources at the Jeffrey Chrysotile Asbestos Mine must be completed. The mine owners have run out of money. An anonymous international consortium is looking to the Quebec Government for a \$58 million loan guarantee so that this work can be completed and new supplies of asbestos can be accessed.² If they are successful, the new Jeffrey asbestos mine will export in excess of 5 million tonnes of asbestos over the next quarter century; the vast majority of exports will go to developing countries, most of which are in Asia. It should be noted that a de facto ban on the use of asbestos exists in Canada.

Timing

For more than six months, the Quebec government has been considering whether to finance the mine. It has asked for a political opinion from the Regional Conference of Elected Officials, an organisation of politicians representing the asbestos-mining region; these individuals are supporters of the asbestos industry and the proposed mine since it means that 250 miners would get re-hired and perhaps an additional 200 miners would be hired over time.

This is a totally cynical move by the Quebec Government; it is like asking Bill Gates if he likes Microsoft? The Statement of Advice from the Conference of local politicians is expected by December 20, 2010; it is more likely than not that the Quebec Government will approve financing for the mine over the Christmas holidays when there is little chance of the media covering the news.

Opposition

There is outrage amongst asbestos victims that Canada is poised to enter a new era of asbestos production. Commenting on these developments, the Chair of a group

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² All of Canada's and Quebec's medical associations and public health associations oppose the asbestos mine and have asked the Quebec government not to finance it. Premier Charest and Prime Minister Harper have repeatedly refused to meet with Canada's and Quebec's health authorities and refuse to listen to their advice. Instead, both the Quebec and Canadian governments say they will continue to support the asbestos industry.

representing UK victims said it was “malevolent and immoral for Canada to dump asbestos, a substance it will not use within its own borders, overseas.” Asbestos victims in Asian countries which are major consumers of Canadian asbestos point out that a lack of any measures to minimize hazardous exposures and the impossibility of obtaining medical care or financial assistance for the asbestos injured makes the import of Canadian asbestos a potentially fatal transaction.

A delegation of representatives from asbestos-consuming countries in Asia are planning a series of events in Montreal, Quebec and Ottawa at the beginning of December to highlight their concerns over the Quebec Government’s financial support for the expansion of asbestos mining. To coincide with the delegation’s visit to Canada, events and measures will be launched by concerned citizens in other countries to highlight the culpability of the Quebec authorities in facilitating and promoting global sales of an acknowledged carcinogen.