

# Will Canada Export Death by Rejuvenating Its Last Asbestos Mine?

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ASBESTOS, Quebec -- A plan to increase production from Canada's last asbestos mine near this town named for the deadly mineral has enraged physicians and public health workers around the globe.

They say the fibers from chrysotile ore, also called white asbestos, are to blame for a worldwide death count in the millions. Many experts are especially upset that the plan calls for the carcinogenic mineral to be shipped to countries where it encounters little, if any, protective restrictions on its use.

Politicians, entrepreneurs and bureaucrats in Quebec insist that the chrysotile ore being mined today 75 miles north of the Vermont border is perfectly safe, harmless to the miners and to the workers and consumers who will handle it.

One of the U.S. government's top toxicology experts on the dangers of asbestos said that is absurd.

"Chrysotile asbestos is a known human carcinogen -- a widely held fact that has been accepted by public health scientists and health agencies for decades," Christopher Weis told AOL News.

"In the U.S. alone, hundreds of thousands of have died from mesothelioma, other forms of lung cancer and asbestosis due to breathing chrysotile fibers," said Weis, senior toxicologist, office of the director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences.

The World Health Organization estimates that more than 107,000 people die worldwide each year from asbestos diseases, and the fibers that cause it have made asbestos a pariah in most developed nations. At least 55 countries have already outlawed the use and importation of asbestos.

## **Inside the World's Largest Asbestos Mine**

At the heart of the current controversy is the Mine Jeffrey, the world's largest asbestos mine and the last of several exhausted asbestos pits clustered in Quebec's Eastern Township area. From this region, for more than a century, has come almost 90 percent of the world's commercial asbestos.

At the Jeffrey, carefully terraced roads cut into jagged serpentine rock spiral down the walls of the pit, 1,500 feet to the bottom. It's a mile wide and almost a mile-and-a-half long, with two huge processing mills on its rim.

From the high tourist overlooks, the 200-ton yellow dump trucks, cranes and dozers, with their 10-foot-high tires, looked like toys. They once rumbled along the narrow switchback roads around the clock. But no longer. As recently as 2006, the mines produced 150,000 tons of ore, worth some \$112 million. Now, they are quiet and pretty much picked clean.

A workforce that once numbered in the thousands has fewer than 200, most part time. However, beneath a vivid blue lake of runoff water pooled on the floor of the gigantic Jeffrey pit is an almost completed underground shaft that engineers and geologists say may be the portal to the largest known reserve of asbestos in the world.

The mine's owner, Bernard Coulombe, did not reply to questions on the underground operation. But, Baljit Chadha, a Montreal-based entrepreneur who is leading a consortium, Balcorp Ltd., of foreign investors that wants to purchase the mine, says that if he can buy Jeffrey, he can supply much of the world's asbestos market for at least 25 years.

Chadha's would-be investors -- from Canada, Europe, Brazil and India -- have asked the Quebec government for a \$57 million loan guarantee (U.S. dollars) to complete construction of the underground mine here, which they say will bring new life to this moribund asbestos-producing region, 95 miles east of Montreal.

Chadha -- who has sold Canadian asbestos to India and other countries for the past 15 years -- says that the loan will spawn a new generation of asbestos miners and will bring at least 500 new jobs to this community.

The future for asbestos is bright, says Balcorp spokesman Guy Versailles.

"There is no way the chrysotile market is drying up; it is in great demand in developing countries as well as in many very rich countries such as Saudi Arabia and Israel," he told AOL News.

But it is where the consortium plans to ship this carcinogenic material that has outraged human rights advocates.

Balcorp says all of the asbestos produced from Mine Jeffrey would be exported to Asia, with about half going to India and the rest to Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan and the Philippines. The countries all seem to share one thing: a lax or nonexistent asbestos-control process.

Canada is widely respected as one of the world's most civil and polite places and is lauded for spending more to take care of its citizens than any other nation. Yet, many Canadian leaders say they fully favor shipping the lethal product to nations where, asbestos experts say, people are least likely know how to protect themselves from asbestos and how it can kill them.

"It is almost beyond belief that a free and democratic nation like Canada is willing to sacrifice human lives in poor and developing nations on the altar of avarice and greed," said Dr. Michael Harbut, a cancer specialist who is the chief of the Center for Occupational and Environmental Medicine at Michigan's Karmanos Cancer Institute.

### **A Coveted Killer**

Asbestos is coveted because it will not rust, or decay with age, has incredible tensile strength and is fireproof up to at least 3,800 degrees. It has long been used in a thousand or more products, including fireproof fabric, gaskets, brakes, shingles, exterior siding, roofing material, pipe and boiler covering, house and attic insulation, floor tiles, paints and consumer products like hair driers.

However, this wondrous mineral does kill.

In addition to chrysotile, there are five major forms of asbestos: crocidolite, amosite, anthophyllite, tremolite and actinolite.

All are carcinogenic to humans and may cause mesothelioma, cancer of the lung, larynx and ovary and other diseases, such as asbestosis and pleural plaques, which is the thickening of tissue on the inner surfaces of the rib cage, diaphragm and pleura.

Chrysotile is the most common form of asbestos used in the world and the only kind mined in Canada. The government has provide the Canadian industry's lobbying group, the Chrysotile Institute, at least \$1 million to promote asbestos. The group, which changed its name from the Asbestos Institute, continues to insist that the material is safe.



Villagers salvage asbestos waste behind an asbestos-cement factory Aug. 6 in the village of Sukasari in Indonesia. The country is one of several that Balcop Ltd. has targeted for potential asbestos shipments.

"It can be used safely in products such as building materials, brake linings, and water and sewer pipe," the trade group says in public statements.

The group insists that the deaths of shipyard workers, builders, boiler makers, plumbers, and automotive and aviation mechanics who worked with chrysotile were caused by "different asbestos, smoking or exposure to other toxic material in the workplace."

"In many countries, chrysotile cement provides inexpensive and durable products for supplying water, transporting sewage and building cost effective housing," the institute says.

The group also maintains that chrysotile fibers do not cause lung disease: "It is thus quite useless to panic in sight of asbestos chrysotile or products containing this fiber."

It's not difficult to imagine the response from health experts to the trade group's position.

"It is an outrageous statement," said Dr. David Egilman, an authority in occupational medicine who for years has testified for both injured workers and asbestos companies in civil litigation.

"Based on all the studies that looked at where cancer occurs -- the pleural cavity or lining of the lung -- the most common fiber is chrysotile," added Egilman, who is board certified in occupational and internal medicine and had worked for the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health.

However, few shrug off the power of Canada's asbestos lobby. It is the same group that sued the U.S. government in 1991 to kill the carefully crafted efforts by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to

ban asbestos. The U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans overturned the ban on a technicality, and Canada continued to sell substantial amounts of its lethal fibers to U.S. manufacturers.

Today, many Canadians are appalled by the plan to rejuvenate the Mine Jeffrey.

"What my country is doing, under the Canadian flag, is completely indefensible and totally hypocritical," said Kathleen Ruff, former director of the British Columbia Human Rights Commission and a longtime opponent of exporting asbestos.

"We don't use asbestos ourselves and are spending millions to remove it from our schools, the House of Commons and other federal buildings, yet we are sending it overseas to be put in homes and schools and developing countries, telling people that it's safe when we know it isn't," the 71-year-old activist told AOL News.

"The tragedy and the shame of the asbestos issue in Canada is that it is treated as a political issue to win votes in the asbestos-mining region."

Also, a poll last month of 1,001 Quebeckers by the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment found that 76 percent opposed their government's funding the mine expansion.

### **Physicians Challenge Safety Claims**

The Balcop consortium promised to construct totally safe factories, carefully ventilated, cleaned and filtered, where the workers will have the latest protective gear, showers and changing room so they don't carry the deadly fibers home to their families.

But experienced voices question what's going to happen to the asbestos wastes from the plants and at the work sites where clouds of asbestos-laden dust inundate builders and others nearby as workers cut, drill and hammer the asbestos-concrete bricks, pipes, shingles, roofing and other products. Inhalation of a single asbestos fiber into the right place in the lungs can be fatal.



Visitors peer into the asbestos open pit mine in Asbestos, Quebec. Mayor Jean-Philippe Bachand is proposing dropping the Asbestos name to make it easier to attract employers to the town, a move that some of its 6,700 residents oppose.

The would-be investors say they can replicate in developing countries what they call "safe use practices," protective equipment and safeguards that they say are now being used in Quebec.

However, most public health authorities point to the vivid, abysmal safety record gigantic asbestos dealers like Johns-Manville, which long owned the Jeffrey pit, and W.R. Grace & Co., which was featured in a recent AOL News series, Killer in the Attic.

According mountains of court documents reviewed by AOL News, these companies and other sellers and users of asbestos routinely concealed the hazard of the material from their workers who were dying and being sickened in the thousands.

Here is just one 30-year-old example of the industry's attitude toward safety. In a 1979 deposition in a civil suit against Johns-Manville and seven other asbestos defendants, a former supervisor of personnel at Newport News Shipyard explained a rationale for not warning employees of the hazards of working with asbestos.

"It boiled down to the fact that if you tell 300 people that what they are working with can cause cancer, you might not have anybody show up for work the next morning," he said.

If this profit-over-safety attitude is commonplace in developed countries, experts worry what's going to happen to safety restrictions in countries where bribes and baksheesh are the norm.

The National Academy of Sciences, EPA, NIOSH, OSHA and 55 countries around the world do not concur with Canada as to chrysotile's safety.

"Canada seems to care more for its own economic well-being and not weigh the horrible effects their greed will have on the lives of countless others throughout the world will suffer and die from continued exposure to asbestos," Dr. Richard Lemen, former U.S. assistant surgeon general, told AOL News.

"The notion that their asbestos is 'safe' or that 'controlled usage' will result in no disease is a myth."

The countries that the Canadians plan to export the chrysotile to know little about occupational safety, said Egilman, who has funded numerous medical programs in this part of the world.

"It is ludicrous, completely absurd, to believe that some countries in ... southern and Southeast Asia can implement safe work policies that have been impossible to implement in Western countries," said Egilman, who is also an associate professor of family medicine at Brown University.

Added Barry Castleman, a noted international asbestos researcher who has long fought for a worldwide ban on the deadly mineral as a representative to the World Trade Organization:

"If this loan deal goes through, it will revive Canada's asbestos industry and cost untold thousands to die, from Canada continuing to lead the propaganda efforts pushing global asbestos use."

## **A Reluctance to Talk**

Trying to get a straight answer from Ottawa and Quebec was much like watching a snake eat its tail.

AOL News contacted the office of Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper for comment on how Canada could ship such a potentially deadly product to countries where people were likely to be exposed to cancer-causing fibers.

Harper's press people said it was a health issue and directed calls to Health Canada. Five calls later, Health Canada said queries should be placed to Natural Resources Canada.

Eventually, Natural Resources told AOL News that, "The government of Canada does not ban naturally occurring substances."

The parsing of language may have more to do with Canada's internal politics than scientific disputes over mineral properties.

Quebec has repeatedly threatened in the past to secede from Canada. That movement is just simmering at the moment, but Quebec's clout in national politics and its uneasy relationship with Canada's English-speaking provinces makes Ottawa tread gingerly on an issue that could throw hundreds of Quebecers out of work.

Others say the puzzling battle is all about winning a couple of seats in the asbestos mining region, where the residents are proud of the miracle mineral they excavate from the ground.

### **A Town of Pride, Destruction and Death**

An elaborately painted, 20-foot-wide, wood-carved, gold-leafed sign "Bienvenue Asbestos" welcomes visitors entering the town.

On several trips to Asbestos over the years, an AOL News reporter was told by the townsfolk that they had no fear of asbestos and had fierce pride in their relationship with the lethal fibers, which began with their ancestors in 1879.



An asbestos mill rises in the background of the cemetery in Asbestos, Quebec, where residents steadfastly maintain that illnesses and deaths of family members and neighbors have nothing to do with the mineral that has been mined there for years.

Almost without exception, they never blamed the illnesses or deaths of their family members and neighbors on the mineral they pulled from the pit.

In fact, none of the town's old-timers ever had anything negative to say about the mines.

Not about the decades of blasting, which often sent huge boulders into the town, damaging and sometimes destroying nearby homes. Nor the heavy white asbestos-filled dust that almost always blanketed the community. Nor the fact that thousands of square feet of the town and hundreds of homes, government buildings and roads in it were swallowed up -- year after year -- by the encroaching of the ever-expanding pit.

One aging miner spoke sadly of the absence of round-the-clock grinding of ore crushers and the deafening rumble of huge equipment. "The heart of our town no longer beats strongly," he said.

Another old miner, hands almost claw-like from arthritis and injuries, kept pointing toward the sky, repeating the same phrase in French.

A translator finally explained: "NASA. If our asbestos is so bad, why is it in the American spacecraft?"

The man acknowledged the town's fondness and respect for its southern neighbors but then spit on the sidewalk and cursed the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

"Our problems were caused by [America's] meddling," he said.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: Schneider has reported on the problems and pain of the people of Asbestos, Quebec, often over the past decade.*