

## ASBESTOS-RELATED DISEASES ARE KILLING CANADIANS IN EPIDEMIC PROPORTIONS

It is estimated that every year more than 145,000 Canadian workers are exposed to asbestos at their workplaces, and tragically over 2,000 are diagnosed with often fatal asbestos cancers and other diseases.

Yet, Canada continues to allow the import and use of asbestos without any comprehensive strategy to phase out asbestos or to promote safe substitutes. Previous governments have refused to ban asbestos, sullyng Canada's international reputation by ignoring scientific and technical information.

In BC, asbestos remains the single largest cause of workplace death.

Despite comprehensive Occupational Health and Safety Regulations (OHSR) to protect workers from asbestos exposure and a strong enforcement framework, countless workers continue to be exposed to harmful levels of asbestos. To make matters worse, nefarious employers that knowingly expose workers to harmful levels of asbestos repeatedly ignore orders, fines, and injunctions and are ultimately not held accountable, as evident by the recent decision by the BC Supreme Court (*Seattle Environmental Consulting vs. Workers' Compensation Board of British Columbia*, 2016 BCSC 557).

There is no simple solution to this crisis. It is incumbent upon all stakeholders – federal, provincial, and municipal governments, Workers' Compensation Boards, employers, and consumers – to end asbestos exposures in the workplace.

British Columbia needs to take the lead and adopt a multi-pronged approach to ensure the prevention of asbestos exposures for BC workers.



## THE BURDEN OF ASBESTOS-RELATED DISEASES

The burden of occupational cancer in Canada due to asbestos exposure is astonishing.

### Human Impact

Mesothelioma and other asbestos-related diseases are devastatingly cruel to workers – not only prematurely stealing countless years from their life, but confining their last days to extreme pain, suffering and disability. Clearly, the full breadth of the impact on workers with asbestos-related disease, their family and friends can never be quantified.

In British Columbia, time loss claims accepted for asbestos-related diseases increased 30% between 2010 and 2014, with an average of 69 claims per year. However, CAREX (Carcinogen Exposure) Canada estimates that occupational exposures to asbestos cause 217 cancers, including mesothelioma, in BC annually.

Appallingly, the death toll has skyrocketed over the past 25 years, from 10 asbestos-related deaths accepted in 1990 to 77 deaths in 2014 – now making up nearly 50% of all accepted workplace fatalities each year.

### Economic Burden

There are also significant economic impacts as a result of workplace exposures to asbestos. Preliminary results estimate the annual economic cost (healthcare, productivity) of work-related asbestos exposures at \$1.9 billion across Canada, as reported by CAREX Canada.

In British Columbia, time loss claims accepted for asbestos-related diseases between 2010 and 2014 cost employers \$54,840,000 – more than \$10 million annually.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**The BC Federation of Labour urges the BC government to convene a provincial roundtable to develop a multifaceted approach to eliminating asbestos exposures in BC workplaces.**

The BC government is uniquely positioned to take the lead in eliminating asbestos exposures in the workplace. At this time, all of the stakeholders recognize the need to take immediate action to address this crisis and are prepared to come together to identify solutions.

British Columbia needs to develop and adopt a multi-pronged strategy, setting the example for other Canadian jurisdictions, as well as support the national call to ban the use, exportation and import of asbestos in Canada.

Due to the complexity of these issues, the BC government should convene a roundtable to identify strategies for eliminating asbestos exposures. The roundtable should include representatives from the federal, provincial and municipal governments, the Workers' Compensation Board, industry, the BC Federation of Labour, the BC Building Trades, asbestos contractors and other subject matter experts.



A comprehensive strategy for BC should include the following components.

### **Provincial government**

**Contractor Licensing** - legislate the requirement to use licenced asbestos abatement contractors and develop a licensing regime;

**Worker Certification** - work with WCB, labour, employers and contractors to develop provincially-recognized competencies, training and certification for asbestos abatement workers;

**Surveyor/Inspector Certification** - work with WCB, labour and employers to develop provincially-recognized competencies, training and certification for asbestos surveyors;

**Laboratories** - work with WCB, labour and employers to develop provincially-recognized competencies and practices for analyzing asbestos samples;

**Building Code** - amend the provincial building code to ban the use of asbestos containing materials in all new construction, including the use of asbestos cement pipe;

**Consumer Incentives** - work with the federal and/or municipal governments to develop incentive programs to encourage consumers (home owners, developers) to use licenced asbestos contractors (for example income tax or other rebates, a reduction in property taxes, etc);

**Consumer Awareness** - develop a consumer awareness campaign about asbestos exposure hazards to consumers, workers, the public, and the environment.

### **Municipal government**

**Permits (Demolition/Excavation/Renovations)** - mandate that a proper hazardous materials inspection and report is done by a qualified person, and that any asbestos abatement work is done by a provincially-licenced contractor, prior to the issuance of a permit for demolition, excavation or renovations.

*Note: in the meantime, municipalities should follow the example of the City of Vancouver by requiring pre-demolition hazardous materials inspection and report by a qualified person, as well as confirmation that the asbestos abatement has been properly completed prior to the issuance of a permit.*

**Property Tax Rebates** - municipalities should consider providing property tax rebates to incentivize home owners to use licenced asbestos abatement contractors and submit completed homeowner audits for asbestos-containing materials.

## Workers' Compensation Board (WCB)

**Expand Strategies to Regional BC** – the Lower Mainland Residential Asbestos Demolition Team strategy is a comprehensive enforcement initiative which includes a partnership between the Board and municipalities to share information with respect to permits requested for demolition projects.

**Automotive Prevention Campaigns** – develop education and awareness campaigns for the automotive repair and maintenance industry to prevent asbestos exposures, including significant support in identifying and substituting asbestos-free brake linings and pads, with progressive enforcement as required.

*Note: the WCB has done a lot of work to educate the construction industry about the potential asbestos-containing material or process that would expose workers to hazardous levels of asbestos. However, according to Statistics Canada, the bulk of imported asbestos is contained in brake linings and pads, often without any labels identifying that they contain asbestos. This aligns with CAREX Canada's report that the automotive repair and maintenance sector ranks third for the largest number of exposed workers in Canada.*

**Develop Robust Enforcement Strategy** – for the OHSR requiring audits of all workplaces and the substitution for safer alternatives. This should be combined with an educational campaign ensuring that all BC workers know that they have a duty to refuse to work in asbestos contaminated areas.

**Convene a Multi-Stakeholder Working Group** – to coordinate prevention and compensation strategic initiatives. This would include addressing the gap between 217 estimated workplace cancers versus 77 registered and compensated. It would also focus on training and certification requirements, providing funding to labour to develop and instruct educational programs.

## Federal government

**Ban Asbestos** – Support the recommendations submitted by the Canadian Labour Congress and the Federations of Labour across Canada. This includes passing legislation officially banning the use, exportation and import of asbestos and asbestos-containing products.



#200 - 5118 Joyce Street  
Vancouver, BC  
Canada, V5R 4H1  
604.430.1421  
bcfed@bcfed.ca

The British Columbia Federation of Labour represents over 500,000 members working in every corner of the province, and in every sector of the economy.

The BCFED has a long and proud history of fighting for the rights of all working people.

The goals of the BCFED are best exemplified by its slogan:  
“What we desire for ourselves, we wish for all.”

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