



MEDIA RELEASE

Prevent Mesothelioma and other Asbestos Diseases in Canada *Organizations call on Prime Minister for an Immediate Asbestos Ban and Expert Panel Review*

December 7, 2016

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Toronto - Over 60 health, labour, and environmental organizations from across Canada urge Prime Minister Trudeau to take the necessary steps to achieve a comprehensive ban on asbestos, beginning with regulatory actions banning asbestos use in the country. These organizations also call on the Prime Minister to establish an expert review panel to address ongoing challenges associated with asbestos management and disposal across Canada. The expert panel is a critical element to protect Canadians, and to prevent future incidences of mesothelioma and other asbestos related diseases (e.g. lung cancers).

Despite ongoing pleas by Canadians urging a federal ban on asbestos and the growing body of evidence demonstrating the health impacts associated with asbestos exposure, very little progress has been made by the federal government. Recent data shows asbestos-related diseases in Canada are increasing. The number of deaths from mesothelioma, a rare form of cancer from workplace exposure to asbestos, increased from 292 cases in 2000 to 580 cases in 2013, while another 1900 new cases of asbestos induced cancers (i.e., lung cancers) are expected annually in addition to other health conditions such as asbestosis.

“Regulations to ban asbestos use in Canada should happen now,” states Theresa McClenaghan, Executive Director and Counsel at the Canadian Environmental Law Association. “This is a critical first step if Canada is to protect Canadians today and for decades to come from asbestos exposure.”

There will be remaining challenges associated with asbestos in Canada facing workers, public health, and the environment. Establishing an expert review panel on asbestos provides an opportunity to scope ongoing challenges in a timely manner, outline resources and additional regulatory measures that may be required to ensure transition planning for affected communities. Australia, which banned asbestos many years ago, for example, conducted an expert review of asbestos management which resulted in creating its Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency to address ongoing asbestos problems.

Federal and provincial governments have the authority to address asbestos, but there are gaps in the approach. They include the lack of comprehensive reporting of asbestos releases and transfers, federal public registries for victims and buildings affected by asbestos, and transparency in disposal management. Parliamentarians have called for action in recent months including proposals to ban asbestos and establish an occupational disease registry. An expert review panel could play a key role to identify and propose recommendations addressing remaining problems facing Canada.

“Many of our members face daily exposure to asbestos-containing materials on university and college campuses. Some have died from mesothelioma, including most recently Pat Martens from the University of Manitoba who had lobbied the previous federal government for a ban,” states David Robinson, Executive Director of the Canadian Association of University Teachers. “We believe that the expert panel will be a reliable tool to assist the federal government with its proposed asbestos ban, helping to make Canadian workplaces safer.”

Families who have lost loved ones from asbestos related diseases, scientists, policy makers, and health professionals are key stakeholders that can make important contributions in scoping, and engaging in, an expert panel review on asbestos.

“As someone who has been directly affected by the mining and production of Canadian asbestos I feel that lack of action on asbestos is a betrayal of workers who have either become sick or have died. I have lost both parents to the asbestos industry. My father through occupational exposure and my mother to exposure to asbestos dust carried home on my father’s work clothes. And now my sister has been diagnosed with pleural plaques, a condition that precedes asbestosis, and my older brother has asbestosis. So asbestos kills not only the workers but also the families of workers,” states Heidi von Palleske, Co-founder of Canadian Voices of Asbestos Victims. "It's long overdue for Canada to act on the ongoing challenges with asbestos continuing to face Canadians. A review process would contribute to the work remaining."

“Every year thousands of Canadians are diagnosed with cancer caused by asbestos. These were caused by exposure to asbestos at work years ago, but we knew about the potentially fatal health effects of asbestos even then,” states Paul Demers, Director of the Occupational Cancer Research Centre. “We can’t undo the sins of the past, but we can do the right thing now by banning asbestos and developing a strategy to protect Canadians from existing asbestos in our buildings and the environment.”

“Unifor has worked diligently with our Health and Safety Representatives and activists to do everything possible to prevent our members from exposure to this deadly substance. There was a time when the inherent danger of asbestos was not understood – that time has long since passed,” said Unifor National President Jerry Dias. “To know and still fail to act is unconscionable. The government of Canada has a moral responsibility to immediately impose a complete ban on asbestos.”

The letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau can be accessed here: <http://www.cela.ca/letter-ban-asbestos-expert-panel>.

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For more information or to arrange an interview, contact:

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Statements

As a palliative care physician, I am reminded with every new patient I have to treat with terminal mesothelioma (cancer of the pleura), that asbestos is, by far, the number one occupational killer in Canada. It clearly should have been banned decades ago.

Jean Zigby, MD, President, Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment

Asbestos kills our members in a greater proportion than any other workplace hazard. We have also taken this scourge home on our work clothes and injured or killed members of our families. This Bill ends the use of this killer, it is high time. It is a step towards a world where men and women who go to work need not worry that the materials they work with will kill them in the course of their employment. A ban on asbestos has been too long coming, but it is now in sight - thank heavens!

Bob Blakely, Canadian Operating Officer, Canada's Building Trades Unions

The Canadian Mesothelioma Foundation (CMF) is a charitable foundation started in 2008 by people whose lives have been personally affected by mesothelioma, a form of cancer that is almost exclusively linked to asbestos exposure. We have seen the devastation caused by this disease and have come together to help others in our country faced with this diagnosis. Additionally we have wanted to play a role in preventing this disease in the future and, as such, have made one of our key mandates be to raise awareness amongst Canadians about the relationship between asbestos exposure and the development of mesothelioma and other asbestos-related diseases. These diseases are the number one cause of workplace deaths in Canada. It is with this knowledge that the CMF supports a comprehensive ban on asbestos in Canada as well as the establishment of an expert panel as proposed in this letter.

Dr. Eudice Goldberg, Chair, Board of Directors, Canadian Mesothelioma Foundation

In March of 2008, my electrician father was diagnosed with mesothelioma and after two agonizing months passed away, unable to breathe as the cancer and fluid consumed his lungs. I joined the ranks of those who fought to keep the asbestos mines closed and wrote letters to politicians as we sought to protect people from the chrysotile produced here. I never wanted anyone in the future to go through what my dad did. With the election last year, we trusted you to keep your promise to ban asbestos and not give in to the chrysotile lobbyists as previous prime ministers had. You have the support of Canadians and have the political power to enact the legislation. The science is sound and the delays unwarranted. Please keep your pledge--ban asbestos production and products now.

Stacy Cattran, daughter of mesothelioma victim, Guelph, ON

Asbestos knows no boundaries, not only are workers being exposed but their loved ones are exposed and become secondary victims. Because of this families are devastated and it over burdens our fragile healthcare system. What is required is a total world-wide ban on asbestos. We cannot change the legacy of our past BUT we can change the future for our workers and their families' future. Canada should proceed with an asbestos ban as a first step but must also include an expert review process to address remaining challenges we face with asbestos.

Sandy Kinart, Victims of Chemical Valley

The mining of asbestos was a crucible of union organizing in Quebec and played a crucial role in advancing the strength of collective action for labour -- but it also killed many workers, and it continues to kill workers who are exposed to it, from mining through to finished products. Asbestos mining in Canada has finally come to a close, but it is now past time to not just ban asbestos products but to track them down and ensure that they cannot continue to kill.

Jamie Kneen, Co-Manager, MiningWatch Canada

The time to act on asbestos is long overdue in Canada. Following the example of other countries, Canada needs to outright ban the use of asbestos and establish an expert panel review on asbestos in the near future to lay out an effective plan to address outstanding challenges associated with asbestos.
Daniel Cayley-Daoust, Energy and Climate Campaigner, The Council of Canadians (National Office – Ottawa, ON)

Too many Canadians have already died from asbestos. We need the Canadian government to show leadership, ban asbestos and initiate a comprehensive national strategy to protect Canadians from further harm from all the asbestos that has been put in our homes, schools, public buildings and infrastructure.

Kathleen Ruff, Director, RightOnCanada.ca

Since our community legal clinic began assisting injured workers with their workers compensation claims in 1969, we have seen the toll that working with asbestos has taken on the lives of Ontario's workers and their shattered families. We urge the government to use this opportunity to establish an expert panel to review the asbestos management regime in Canada and to take the steps necessary to implement a comprehensive ban on asbestos in Canada.

John McKinnon, Executive Director, Injured Workers' Consultants Community Legal Clinic

We regularly see the devastating effects of asbestos on the lives and bodies of workers and their families. Every year, more Canadian workers are being diagnosed with asbestos-related diseases. The entirely preventable suffering and death of workers needs to stop. The government needs to finally institute a comprehensive ban on asbestos in Canada.

Maryth Yachnin, Staff Lawyer, IAVGO Community Legal Clinic

The health effects of asbestos are insidious, devastating and widespread. We can end this public health disaster once and for all, but it will take a comprehensive approach.

Doris Grinspun, Chief Executive Officer, Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario