

THE CHRYSOTILE CRUSADER

(Original version in French, our translation)

by Marc Thibodeau - La Presse

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Thetford Mines - Canada confirmed yesterday that it plans to follow suit with the decision taken by tens of other countries and ban asbestos by 2018, but the announcement will certainly not undermine Jean-Marc Leblond's convictions.

Even if every large health organizations agree that all of the product's sub-varieties are too dangerous to be safely used, the 67 years old man defends tooth and nail the idea that the type of asbestos that used to be produced in Quebec [chrysotile], should still be commercialized.

"Some mushrooms are deadly", he told La Presse this week, in a rare interview given in his Thetford Mine offices, a few days before Ottawa's announcement. "Should we, for that reason, ban them all?"

As the President of the International Chrysotile Association (ICA), Mr Leblond is repeating here, there and everywhere that this type of asbestos can be used safely.

"I've circled the planet three times" says this international marketing specialist to illustrate the scope of his professional activities within the asbestos industry over the past 45 years.

He states that the health problems currently associated with asbestos are the result of past carelessness - an opinion that runs counter to that of a number of public health specialists.

"When I arrived in Thetford Mines, people had to sweep asbestos dust from their doorsteps every morning" relates the ICA representative, which is funded by foreign asbestos producers and importers' associations.

Falsified studies and twisted facts

Anti-asbestos activists that have been fighting for years to get asbestos completely banned, claim that the Association headed by Mr. Leblond uses falsified studies to prove its points on chrysotile and never hesitates to aggressively attack its detractors to make its points.

Rather, the ICA representative argues that it is those crusaders who distort the facts when they refuse to acknowledge that chrysotile asbestos is less dangerous and that it should not be treated in the same way as the other types of asbestos.

"My affirmations are based on science" he says, pulling out a series of thick reports prepared by the organization which regroups various studies on that matter.

The World Health Organization (WHO) doesn't share the ICA's views and maintains that there is no safe threshold when it comes to asbestos use, regardless of the type of fiber.

This position irks Mr Leblond, which criticizes WHO experts for having arrived at this position without ever taking his organization's opinions into consideration.

The ICA, he says, even resorted to engaging unusual judicial proceedings in order to be heard in Geneva. "We're not asking for the moon", he says, "we just want the opportunity to be heard, but the WHO bureaucrats won't give it to us."

A spokesperson for the organization in Switzerland told La Presse he was not aware of any such procedure, which, according to Mr. Leblond, is presently "suspended".

The ICA is also actively attempting to prevent the classification of chrysotile asbestos as a dangerous product within the Rotterdam Convention, even if the scientific committee of the organization responsible for the convention's application has long recommended its inclusion.

Such classification would put an end to all international trading of chrysotile asbestos, affirms Mr. Leblond, who objects the recent proposal put forward by a group of African countries to review the Convention's consensus-based decision making process in order to end the deadlock.

Canada, at a time when it actively defended the local industry, used to intervene directly to prevent chrysotile asbestos' classification but it now promises to "update" its position.

For a long time, Health Canada cautioned the idea that various types of asbestos fibers could carry different levels of dangerousness, but discreetly eliminated that distinction last year.

Remnants of the past

Mountains of mining residues bear witness to the past importance of the local industry, which has been shut down. They are now at the heart of the city's recovery plan, notes Mr Leblond, who insists on their rich mineral contents and on the economic spinoffs that they could generate.

"But they also contain traces of asbestos. If Ottawa imposes a complete ban, there is a risk that we won't be able to exploit them" added the ICA President, before the government's announcement, which was reassuring on that particular subject.

The decision not to distinguish chrysotile from other types of asbestos is nevertheless an issue for Mr Leblond, who was asked by some members of his organization if the ICA would intervene to counter Ottawa's intentions.

"I told them that it would be inappropriate for an organization entirely funded by foreign interests to intervene on that matter. And I will repeat that if the Board raises the issue again."

However, Canada is wrong when it refuses to make a distinction between the various type of asbestos fibers maintains Mr Leblond, who expects that the ICA head office will move abroad if Ottawa doesn't change its position on that issue.

"That would be the end of it" he concludes.

ICA, a little known organization

According to anti-asbestos militants, the International Chrysotile Association (ICA) regularly intervenes abroad to protect the industry and discourage the adoption of measures that would limit chrysotile asbestos trading. Its headquarters were transferred in Quebec at the end of the 90s when France banned asbestos and its mission was later reviewed to focus specifically on defending chrysotile asbestos, says its president, Jean-Marc Leblond. Registered as a non-profit organization, it operates, according to him, with an annual budget of "less than one million dollars" and operates from an office in Thetford Mines which is also headquarters an "international representation" firm created by Mr. Leblond, Polyser, which bills the ICA for its services. The administrators listed on Quebec's Enterprise Registrar (the REQ) come from asbestos producing countries such as Russia, Kazakhstan and Brazil and from importing countries such as India.

SOME EXCEPTIONS IN QUEBEC

Joël-Denis Bellavance, La Presse

Aware of the economic difficulties weighing on certain Quebec municipalities that for decades were at the heart of Canada's asbestos production, the Trudeau government has no intention of preventing the cities of Asbestos and Thetford Mines from revalorising asbestos residues by extracting its magnesium contents. Science minister Kirsty Duncan acknowledged Quebec's "long history" with the asbestos industry and declared that she would not attempt to prevent the province from trying to benefit from business opportunities that could stem from the residues' utilization. The last Quebec asbestos mine closed in 2012.

A SIGH OF RELIEF IN THE AFFECTED AREAS

Joël-Denis Bellavance, La Presse

The mayor of Asbestos, Hughes Grimard expressed relief upon hearing that the Trudeau government would not put an end to ongoing projects in his municipality. "It is important to reassure investors, because of the huge potential in terms of economic development" he said in a Radio-Canada interview. Mr Grimard explained that there could be as much as 400 million tons of exploitable mineral residues. The Richmond MNA (member of the Quebec National Assembly), Karine Vallières, also expressed her satisfaction and noted that other projects are currently being reviewed in areas which once depended on the asbestos industry.