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U.S. imports of asbestos brake material are on rise

Much of the material is mined in Canada, called “the great Satan of asbestos” by one public health specialist. New studies dispute Canada’s assertion that its asbestos is safe.

By Andrew Schneider

Of the Post-Dispatch

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ASBESTOS, Quebec — Shipments to U.S. ports of potentially hazardous asbestos brake material have increased 300 percent in the past decade. Rather than acting to stem the tide, Washington lawmakers are engaged in a fierce effort to pass legislation that will prevent victims of asbestos-related disease from suing American companies.

The two-year-long battle to pass the so-called Asbestos Fairness Act would set up a government-run fund for asbestos victims and control who could or could not sue. It was based on the premise that the cancer-causing material was no longer being used.

Government records say that isn't the case. Information collected by port inspectors of the U.S. Customs Service and released by the U.S. Geological Survey show that last year asbestos products worth \$208.9 million came into the country. Of that, \$124.6 million was asbestos friction material for brakes, more than half mined in Canada.

Some government officials find the numbers astounding. “I was shocked at the increase in asbestos imports and shocked for two reasons,” said Steve Johnson, the acting deputy administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency. “One is just the number, the amount of the increase. The second is that given all of the tort liability issues that are swirling around asbestos, I just can’t imagine why a manufacturer or importer of asbestos products would want to make themselves vulnerable to these types of suits.”

Johnson was with the agency in July 1989 when the EPA issued

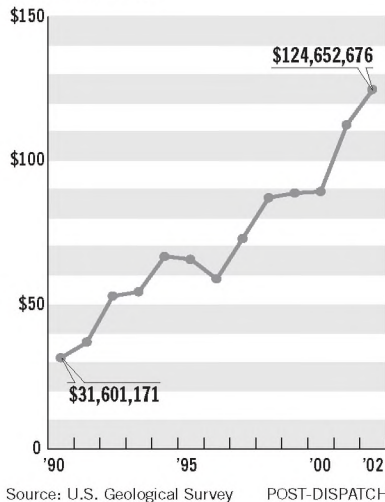


A memorial to fallen miners in Asbestos, Quebec, sits next to one of the world’s largest asbestos mines. For decades, it has been the source of most of the asbestos imported into the United States.

Brake material imports

Foreign asbestos brake material imported into the United States has increased almost 300 percent in the past 12 years.

FIGURES IN MILLIONS



Source: U.S. Geological Survey POST-DISPATCH

regulations that barred the man-

ufacture, importation, processing and sale of almost all products containing asbestos. Almost instantly, U.S. asbestos manufacturers, strongly supported by the governments of Canada and Quebec province, sued the EPA. On Oct. 18, 1991, the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans overturned the ban. Today, more than 33 countries have barred asbestos but it still remains legal to mine, import and sell asbestos in the United States.

“You cannot underestimate the power of the Canadians when it comes to protecting their asbestos,” said Dr. Barry Castleman, a former consultant to the European Union on asbestos issues and public health specialist. “They were effective in killing EPA’s ban and their presence is still obvious. They want a bigger piece of the U.S. market.”

“With so many countries banning the import of asbestos, Canada needs to be able to point

to the United States as a consumer to convince third-world nations that it’s still safe to use Canadian asbestos. Canada is truly the great Satan of asbestos.”

For decades, the Canadian asbestos industry insisted that the asbestos it mined — chrysotile — was safe. The few deaths that were identified at Quebec’s two mines were attributed to contaminated oil, Australian asbestos used by a World War II gas mask manufacturer near the Jeffrey Mine, or from tremolite asbestos, like the fibers that killed and sickened hundreds living near a vermiculite mine in Libby, Mont., Dr. David Egilman wrote in the current issue of the American Journal of Industrial Medicine.

“The asbestos industry funded medical research which always concluded ABC. Anything but chrysotile,” Egilman, a Massachusetts physician and expert in toxic materials, said in a telephone interview. “The safety of their as-

bestos was the pitch that their lobbyists used to the U.S. Congress to fight the ban and now, we’ve got a soaring number of asbestos brakes again coming in from Canada, and again we’re hearing how safe their asbestos is.”

The illusions of the safety of Quebec asbestos may be put to rest when two reports on asbestos-related illnesses and deaths are released later this week by the Canadian National Institute of Public Health.

“We have documented significantly high numbers of asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma among the miners and the people living near the two mines” in Quebec, said Dr. Louise De Guire, a physician with both the national institute and the Montreal Health Department. “Here in Quebec we are sure that we have asbestos disease cases related to exposure to chrysotile coming from our mines and at a rate higher than most of the rest of the

world.”

Pressure to sellThe Jeffrey Mine is the very heart of the town of Asbestos. It is terraced to the depth of a 100-story building and is a mile and quarter across at its center. Tailing piles of asbestos ore tower over nearby homes and a school. The downtown section of the town has been moved several times as the mine expanded.

Today, the mine is silent. The demand for asbestos has diminished to the point where Quebec’s 1,200 asbestos miners work only half a year.

The mine, which was once owned by an American company, made its last delivery this year to NASA. About 1.2 million pounds of baled asbestos was trucked to the ATK Thiokol plant in Utah for use as insulation in the space shuttle program.

The Quebec government is doing all it can to increase the use of asbestos. “Last year the government adopted a policy to encourage the creation of new industries and development of new products to use asbestos,” De Guire said. “They did it because when they send missions to other countries to sell asbestos they are asked why we don’t use more asbestos here in our own country.”

“The unions and the government are for it. Only we in public health worry about the deaths that will come for years.”

The Quebec government and American users of asbestos continue to fight efforts to again institute a ban, say Capitol Hill staffers watching the progress of the “Ban Asbestos in America” bill. Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., introduced the legislation in each of last two sessions.

Part of Murray’s bill was adopted earlier this year by Judiciary Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, as a peace offering to Democrats who found serious fault with the fairness legislation. Hatch’s bill is awaiting a vote by the full Senate, but its chances of passing appear remote.

Murray said that regardless of the Hatch bill, she will continue to fight for her asbestos bill. “It is outrageous that at the same time Congress is trying to protect companies from future asbestos lawsuits, we continue to import and consume more and more asbestos,” Murray said.

Charles Arms of the Post-Dispatch staff also provided information for this story.