

**Canadian Government Claims  
Chrysotile Asbestos Can  
Be Used, Exported Safely**

QUEBEC — Ahead of the September 2004 Rotterdam Convention in which the international community is set to discuss placing export controls on chrysotile asbestos, the Canadian government has issued a consultation document contending that chrysotile asbestos can be used safely and its exportation/importation should not be restricted.

(Canadian consultation document available. Document #64-040324-102X.)

The Canadian government on Feb. 26 released "Addition of Chrysotile Asbestos to the PIC Procedure of the Rotterdam Convention," in which it offers the country's position that chrysotile can be used in a safe manner and that its exportation should not be controlled or constrained. The document was released after Canada and Russia last November blocked an agreement that would have given the international community the right to ban imports of chrysotile asbestos.

**Rotterdam Convention**

A decision on whether chrysotile will be added to the Prior Informed Consent (PIC) procedure for certain hazardous chemicals and pesticides in international trade is set to be made at the Rotterdam Convention Sept. 20-24 in Geneva. At the November 2003 meeting, four other types of asbestos, actinolite, anthophyllite, amosite and tremolite, were added to the PIC procedure; chrysotile was not.

"The Government of Canada recognizes that all forms of asbestos fibres are carcinogenic. However, recent literature reviews indicate that chrysotile poses significantly less risk for mesothelioma, and probably lung cancer than amphibole asbestos forms. The particular chemical composition of chrysotile confers a crystalline structure and physical properties that are quite different from that of the amphibole asbestos minerals, and explains in large part the difference in toxicity between the two asbestos groups, amphiboles being recognized as significantly

more toxic than chrysotile," the Canadian government says.

The consultation document outlines the procedures for proposing and placing a substance in the PIC procedure, the status of chrysotile under the current Rotterdam Convention agreement, Canada's position on the use of chrysotile asbestos and the economic and environmental implications of adding chrysotile to the PIC procedure.

The document asks for the input of Canadians and various interested stakeholders about the proposed inclusion of chrysotile on the PIC procedure. The government asks what effects, if any, are foreseen if chrysotile becomes subject to the PIC procedure, what effects are foreseen if Canada opposes the addition of chrysotile to the PIC procedure and how these potential effects could be addressed.

**Controlled Use**

The Canadian government contends that its current controlled-use approach is consistent with the 1986 International Labor Organization Convention concerning the safe use of asbestos and that it has been responsible over the past 20 years in promoting the safe use of chrysotile asbestos among its citizens at home and among workers abroad where the material is being exported.

"Canada's provincial and federal governments have adopted and advocate a controlled use approach for chrysotile. Chrysotile, used safely under controlled conditions, can continue to provide valuable benefits to society. The expression 'controlled use' means that regulations to ensure safer handling of asbestos are properly enforced in order to strictly control exposure to asbestos. . . . The Canadian government is of the view that Canadian chrysotile can be used without undue risk in building materials, friction products, pipes and other industrial applications, provided it is manufactured, handled with care, and exposures to dust are stringently prevented or controlled to low levels," the government says.

The Rotterdam Convention was adopted in 1998, and Canada became a member in Au-

gust 2002. The objectives of the convention are to promote shared responsibility and cooperative efforts among participating countries in the international trade of hazardous chemicals to protect human health and the environment from potential harm and to facilitate an information exchange by the member countries that will contribute to the environmentally sound use of hazardous materials.

**PIC Procedure**

The inclusion of a chemical in the PIC procedure does not globally ban the substance or entirely restrict an individual country from exporting or importing the substance. Under the Rotterdam Convention, the PIC procedure is designed to subject chemicals on the list to extensive information exchange, priority attention for national decisions about imports and obligations related to export controls. If a chemical is added to the PIC procedure, exporters trading hazardous substances on the restricted international list are required to obtain the prior informed consent of importers before proceeding with the trade.

Last November, in meetings with the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee, a group under the Interim Chemical Review Committee of the United Nations, Canada and Russia led major asbestos producers in blocking an agreement to add chrysotile to the PIC procedure, saying they were not ready to accept the entire list of chemicals, including chrysotile asbestos, covered by the 1998 Rotterdam Convention.

Joining Canada and Russia in blocking chrysotile from being added to the PIC procedure were Ukraine, China, Zimbabwe, India, Indonesia, South Africa and Colombia. According to the Canadian government, the worldwide asbestos industry is valued at about \$300 million annually; Russia is the world's largest producer.

(Additional documents available: Natural Resources Canada background. Document #64-040324-003X. Health Canada background. Document #64-040324-004X. Natural Resources Canada risk management. Document #64-040324-005X.) ■