IBEW British Columbia Provincial Council

Ministry of Labour
Room 342 Parliament Buildings
Victoria, BC V9V 1X4

November 30, 2017

Attention: Honourable Minister Harry Bains

Dear Harry,

Re: Asbestos Awareness and Registries

I would like to start by thanking you for the opportunity to provide a submission on such an important subject that has been responsible for ending so many lives far too soon.

This Cancer-causing mineral was used in almost every aspect of construction and exists in most Canadian built vessels and buildings constructed from the turn of the 19th century until the 1980s. Literally, every residential renovation project we work on, every industrial plant and every commercial and institutional building throughout our country has a percentage of asbestos in it. As there is no standard training for abatement on a National level and B.C.'s training is sadly well behind other provinces in this regard, we are calling on the BC government to develop the necessary training and keep all BC skilled trades workers safer on the job. Young workers have had little or no educational exposure to asbestos and the products that contain asbestos in their workplace, we are calling on the BC government to develop a Provincial Awareness Plan.
Lastly, as it is still being imported today by countries like China and India in many products, as it only gets red flagged if it is imported 100% asbestos, and the federal ban that comes in to effect January 2018 contained no provisions prohibiting stockpiling the product for manufacture for years to come, we are calling on a complete ban of any product containing asbestos in British Columbia.

Asbestos in History

Asbestos occurs naturally in large deposits on every continent in the world.
Archeologist's uncovered asbestos fibers dating back to the Stone Age, or about 750,000 years ago.
As early as 4000 BC, asbestos's long, hair-like fibers were used for wicks in lamps and candles.
Around the same time, embalmed bodies of Egyptian pharaohs were wrapped in asbestos cloth to protect the bodies from deterioration.
In Finland, clay pots dating back to 2500 BC contained asbestos fibers, which are believed to have strengthened the pots and make them resistant to fire.

Around 450 BC, the Greeks would use asbestos shrouds wrapped around the dead before their bodies were tossed onto the funeral pyre to prevent their ashes from being mixed with those of the fire itself. Some scholars claim the word asbestos comes from the ancient Greek term, sasbestos, meaning inextinguishable, a characterization of the material's invincibility from the intense heat of the fire pits used by the Greeks for cooking and warmth.
While Greeks and Romans exploited the unique properties of asbestos, they also documented its harmful effects on those who mined the silken material from ancient stone quarries. It was noted as a "sickness of the lungs" in slaves who wove asbestos into cloth.
Roman historian and naturalist, Pliny the Elder, wrote of the "disease of slaves," and actually described the use of a thin membrane from the bladder of a goat used by the slave miners as an early respirator in an attempt to protect them from inhaling the harmful asbestos fibers as they laboured.
In 1095, the French, German and Italian knights who fought in the First Crusade used a catapult to fling flaming bags of pitch and tar wrapped in asbestos bags over city walls during their sieges.
In 1280, Marco Polo wrote about clothing made by the Mongolians from a fabric that would not burn.
Chrysotile asbestos was mined during the reign of Peter the Great, Russia's tsar from 1682 to 1725.
Paper made from asbestos was discovered in Italy in the early 1700s. By the 1800s, the Italian government was utilizing asbestos fibers in its bank notes.
The Parisian Fire Brigade in the mid-1850s wore jackets and helmets made from asbestos.

The Industrial Revolution

It was not until the late 1800s, at the start of the Industrial Revolution, that asbestos mining sustained strong and steady growth. That is when the practical and commercial uses of asbestos, with its various practical applications, became widespread. As the mining and manufacturing of asbestos flourished, so did its negative health effects on those who mined and refined the mineral, as well as those who used it. Its resistance to chemicals, water and electricity made it an excellent insulator for the steam engines, turbines, boilers, ovens and electrical generators that powered the New Industrial Age. The malleable properties of asbestos made it an important building, binding and strengthening commodity.
In 1876, chrysotile (white asbestos) was discovered in the Thetford Township, in southeastern Quebec. Shortly afterward, Canadians established the world's first commercial asbestos mines, excavating the soft, fibrous form of the mineral, which is found in more than 95 percent of all asbestos products.
"Rock Wool" is by no means a product of recent manufacture; it is only with the study of its effects aligned with the value we now put on the working class human health and mortality that it has been red-flagged by the entire health care, workplace safety, and science community.

Uses in Construction

So, where do we find asbestos, in our homes and workplace?

We frequently find asbestos in construction materials manufactured between 1920 and 1981. Asbestos used to be so cheap, available, and accessible that it is hard to find an asbestos-free construction material. The most prominent places where we still find asbestos are in the construction materials of older buildings (pre-1980s):
- Transite Pipes, cement-like pipes, which are usually grey in color with a rough surface;
- Transite boards, asbestos-cement boards, and corrugated boards. Flat panels were used as water and weather resistant material. Corrugated panels were used as a common roofing material;
- Typically, a lower trace amount in Vermiculite attic insulation; (usually between 0.1 -to 2%);
- As well as other types of Insulation used on pipes and boilers, pipe wrap, and mastic glue;

- Vinyl floor tiles, underlay, and their adhesive;
- Textured ceiling paint known as popcorn ceiling;
- Ceiling tiles, putties and caulks, drywall mudding compound;
- Plaster on lathe and plaster;
- Roofing shingles;
- Pre- 1950s electrical wiring and other electrical products.

Essentially, if a person's home or workplace was built pre-1980, there is a good possibility they are surrounded by construction materials made in some part with asbestos.

The important part to remember is that as long as it is not disturbed, you are likely not coming into contact with the asbestos dust.

Hundreds of houses are demolished and renovated every month in B.C., with an increase over the dry summer months, giving the asbestos dust a better ability to stay airborne.

Asbestos imports into Canada are increasing: imports of asbestos-related items rose to almost **$6 million in 2015 from $4.9 million** the year before.

Michèle LaRose, a spokesperson for Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC), confirmed in an e-mail to COHSN that the federal National Building Code still permits construction projects to use non-friable asbestos-cement products.

A survey by the Altus Group, a real estate research company, shows **renovation spending in Canada reached $68 billion in 2014**, $20 billion more than was spent on new homes the same year.

> **Renovation spending is now such an important part of the overall Canadian economy that it accounted for 3.4 per cent of gross domestic product in 2014.**

According to Peter Norman, Altus Group's chief economist, "Housing stock in Canada keeps getting older and there are a number of homes out there that are more than 50 years old and they require a lot of work all the time." About 40 per cent of respondents in the Altus survey believe small renovation jobs under $5,000 are done with cash, often performed by non-certified tradesmen and women.

Health and Safety Epidemic

Asbestosis has a long latency period, which means the disease usually does not develop until years after the asbestos exposure that caused it. In most cases, symptoms of asbestosis take 25 to 35 years to present from the time someone is initially exposed to asbestos. This means the damage from the 1970's/80's is only starting to show up now, and for this reason mesothelioma is exceptionally rare in individuals younger than the age of 45. The Mesothelioma Center traces most cases back to consistent exposure to asbestos-containing materials in construction sites, ships and industrial facilities.

Deaths of B.C. construction workers jumped 40 per cent in 2015, an increase fueled by the number of workers who have died after being exposed to asbestos while on their jobs decades ago.

Al Johnson, WorkSafeBC's Prevention Service Vice-President, said the situation may be worse than originally thought. He said actuarial tables estimated asbestos-related fatalities would peak between 2015 and 2020, but instead, WorkSafe is now expecting the high number of deaths to go on longer.

"We think it's because there have been more exposures and more workers working with asbestos than originally had been anticipated in industry," Mr. Johnson said.

Last year in British Columbia, 44 construction workers died, 26 of them from exposure and 18 from trauma. In 2014, 31 construction workers died – 19 from exposure and 12 from trauma.

Asbestos, once widely used because of its resistance to fire and heat, is now considered a leading workplace killer in Canada and is linked to about 5,000 deaths since 1996. Health issues caused by the silicate mineral include mesothelioma, asbestosis and lung cancer.

Without the highest standards and safest learned practices, the construction and maintenance industries will be fraught with many more injuries and fatalities it typically sees.
This brings me to the reason we are writing you: as you well know, the mining of asbestos shut down a couple of years ago and Canada is no longer exporting this dangerous product abroad to emerging countries like India to process; however, asbestos is not unlike a land mine waiting patiently until someone, often not directly involved, walks innocently by and ends their life. Of course, the one is usually immediate and more dramatic, while the other prolongs a person's painful existence, typically suffering for years. The Canadian construction landscape is checkered with these delayed landmines.
As a 35-year construction and shipyard electrician, I have watched many friends and co-workers diagnosed with pleural plaques on their lungs and asbestosis. This diagnosis is nothing less than a death sentence. They slowly and prematurely wither away and die an agonizing death due solely from breathing while at work.
For the past 9 years I have served as the Chair of the IBEW-BC Provincial Council, an organization of approximately 13,000 British Columbian electrical workers, who also move in and out of a number of west coast construction and heavy industry.
The proliferation of products containing asbestos throughout the building construction, shipbuilding and repair industries over the past 75 and more years will likely go down in modern-day civilized history as one of our worst self-inflicted human fatalities, save and except war. Casualties of this industrial illness will not subside for many years to come. The best we can hope for is to mitigate its relentless wake.

Beginning the Resolve

Therefore, we are calling on the Provincial Government as well as all provincial and municipal governments to develop and establish a **Provincial Building Registry of all Public Buildings which utilize Building Products containing Asbestos**, and to make that registry online and available to all restoration and construction workers and companies so they may see if the buildings they (will) work in have asbestos products, what form those products containing the asbestos fibers are in (ie. floor tiles, ceiling tiles, insulation, drywall, pipe and cladding, etc), and how best to remove or disturb each type of product. We are proposing the Building Registry begin with all public buildings, our parliament, legislatures, office and administration buildings, schools, hospitals, city halls, and associated real estate and public work yards.

We are also calling on the Provincial Government which utilize public marine transportation, the B.C. Ferries, and any other publicly owned vessel to develop and establish a **Provincial Vessel Registry of all Maritime Vessels which utilize Products and equipment containing Asbestos**. That, The Registry be available online so that Canadian Shipyard Workers can obtain the information on the products that could potentially kill them prior to them beginning work on the particular equipment, system or vessel structure.

When we properly identify and publish the risks construction/shipyard/remediation/ and all workers face, the Canadian workforce will be better prepared and we will all benefit from reduced exposure. That was essentially the national thrust of programs like, "right to know" and "WHMIS".

The baby boomer generation is well versed in asbestos as we have seen its extraction from our lands, we have used it, and we have lived and worked with it all around us. We are on the eve of mass retirement with a new generation of workers who know very little of the harmful effects asbestos exposure can cause.

Therefore, we are calling on the Provincial Government to develop a plan to better educate our youth moving into the construction, heavy industry and marine Shipbuilding and Repair sectors with the purpose to help identify products made of asbestos and those which can often contain asbestos, by establishing the last week of April as "Asbestos Awareness" week. This would be in-step with our closest neighbor and largest trading partner as the USA has recently proclaimed the first week of April dedicated to the same cause. We are suggesting the last week of April because, April 28th is globally known as the Day of Mourning, a day recognized to honour those who lost their lives while at work, and the number one fatal illness in Canada are those workers who died from inhaling asbestos dust. We believe the highest level of respect we can give those who lost their lives while at work is to fight for those who continue to do the job, to educate the living against the dangers, so they can return home to their loved ones.

We are also recommending that a national standard apprenticeship be developed known as "Hazmat Worker" so those that are involved in remediation have the developed skills and knowledge in proper procedure of remediation of asbestos products. Today these workers are lucky to receive any information on the asbestos product they are removing, how to remove it safely and maybe a throwaway pair of coveralls and a dust mask. Many of them are hired by a labour broker as an independent contractor so they have no recourse to the unsafe work. Developing this worker classification would be the work of the Industry Training Authority, which stems through B.C.'s Labour Minister. So, although we believe the standard should be a national one, it must come from the incentive of our Provincial Government.

Lastly, we are calling on the Provincial Government to move forward on Legislation banning all products containing asbestos and to cease them being imported into or through British Columbia for any purpose, as well as ending its use in any construction materials. We have finally come to grips with what the rest of the world's developed nations have known for decades: products containing asbestos can be fatal from simply drawing a breath of air, something we all do 20-30 thousand times each and every day. Currently, our import laws allow unregulated importation of asbestos products-they can be found in anything from our after-market vehicle brake pads, some types of building piping, laminate flooring and many other products without our knowledge.
Nothing prohibits our Provincial Government to issue a ban on products containing asbestos, and joining the other 55 countries who have already done so.

Canadians look towards their elected officials to champion the causes that serve and protect them; it is our own elected officials who for the past five decades have allowed this travesty to continue and spread with full knowledge of the personal anguish, pain and sorrow it was causing. It is time to write a new chapter on this tragic story, with pages of education, transparency, understanding and knowledge. We look forward to seeing real action with measurable results on this file in the names of those who have given their lives, their families, as well as those young adults entering the trades today.

I would like to thank you for your time in reading our recommendations and look forward to a day when every worker can obtain the information they need to do their job in the safest way possible.

Kindest Regards,

Phil Venoit, Chair
IBEW - BC

cc: Honourable John Horgan, M.L.A., Premier of British Columbia
Honourable Melanie Mark, M.L.A., Minister of Advanced Education, Skills and Training
Honourable Selina Robinson, M.L.A., Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing