

Canada admits asbestos opponents are right

Officials still oppose Rotterdam Convention's export limits

BY SARAH SCHMIDT, POSTMEDIA NEWS JUNE 24, 2011

The Canadian delegation at an international summit admitted Thursday it agrees with the work of a United Nations scientific panel that wants limits placed on the export of chrysotile asbestos, but Canada still won't back the move.

The admission, made at a UN conference in Geneva to decide whether to label the known carcinogen mined in Quebec as hazardous, re-inforced a growing sentiment that domestic politics are behind Canada's entrenched position to block the listing of chrysotile asbestos as a hazardous material on Annex III of the UN's Rotterdam Convention.

The number of people employed in asbestos mining in Quebec has dropped to between 450 and 500, but there is an expansion plan at the main Jeffrey Mine to increase exports to India.

India, Canada's largest im-porter of chrysotile on Wednesday reversed its past opposition to the listing, but its support is now moot because Canada's opposition guarantees it won't happen this year. Without consensus among all countries, a substance cannot be listed. The weeklong UN summit ends today.

Materials listed on this annex require "Prior Informed Consent" - meaning before countries export listed goods, they must inform importers of the risks and pre-cautionary measures for safe handling, to which importers must consent.

The Canadian delegation Thursday said the expert panel's guidance, which included its recommendation to list the carcinogen on Annex III, was "appropriate and the criteria for listing was met. Canada is not in a position to support the listing."

When pressed by observers about whether Canada's objection was then based on politics, the Canadian delega-tion declined to answer the question directly.

The supportive words from the Canadian delegation about the work of the UN's expert panel, which cited more than 30 scientific reports to back up its recommendation - appears at odds with the message of Conservative ministers, who have invoked scientific studies to defend their opposition to the listing.

For example, following developments in Geneva, Industry Minister Christian Paradis rose in the House of Commons Thursday and cited scientific studies to defend Canada's rejection of the recommendation of the UN convention's expert committee.

NDP leader Jack Layton called the government's actions at the UN summit "cowardly."

"Its position makes no sense. Countries must be scratching their head because once upon a time Canada was known for advancing environmental and health-related issues on the world stage. I think people are now increasingly seeing us as a pariah," Layton told reporters.

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