

ASBESTOS AND THE AMERICAS

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Countries in the Americas are important stakeholders in the asbestos industry. From 1900 to 2008, asbestos consumption in the Americas was 43+ million tonnes.¹ As a result of the widespread use of thousands of tainted products, human beings, infrastructures and environments were contaminated. Epidemics of asbestos disease have been documented in the United States, Canada, Brazil and Mexico; elsewhere the situation is unclear due to lack of data. The mesothelioma death last year of Hollywood columnist Army Archerd attracted much media attention; the same cannot be said for thousands of other asbestos deaths throughout North, South and Central America. Current high-profile examples of the residual problems stemming from asbestos pollution include remediation work ongoing at iconic buildings such as the U.S. Capitol, the Canadian Parliament and the United Nations headquarters.

Conclusion: Asbestos exposure which is too dangerous for American politicians and diplomats, is not, so our governments maintain, problematic for everyone else.

Much of the asbestos used in the Americas was “home grown.” From 1900 to 2008, more than 70 million tonnes of asbestos was sourced from mines in Canada, Brazil and the U.S. **We grew it, used it and sold it.** We were so good at producing asbestos, that our output exceeded demand; as a result, millions of tonnes were exported. Unfortunately, our collective responsibility for spreading the asbestos epidemic is not consigned to the history books. Two of the world’s five biggest asbestos exporters are in the Americas; in 2008, Brazil and Canada accounted for 21% of total global output of chrysotile asbestos. Although the U.S. stopped mining asbestos in 2002, in 2008, the U.S. exported \$32.2 million of asbestos and asbestos products, 61% of which went to four countries: **Mexico, Canada, China and South Korea.**² That year, U.S. asbestos exports to countries in the Americas accounted for 44% of all sales. In 2008, more than 10% of Canadian asbestos was sold to other countries in the Americas.³ Brazil also sells substantial amounts of asbestos to Mexico and Colombia.⁴

Conclusion: Asbestos stakeholders in the Americas contribute to the contamination of their own and neighboring countries.

¹ All of this data was either supplied by email from the United States Geological Survey (U.S.G.S.) or can be sourced on its website.

² From 2007 to 2008, U.S. asbestos sales to Mexico increased by 5% and to Canada decreased by 10%.

³ Three American countries were amongst Canada’s ten best customers; they were: Brazil (5.4% = \$5.6 m spent on Canadian asbestos imports), Mexico (3.5% = \$3.6m) and Colombia (2% = \$2.1 m).

Mittelstaedt M. *Controversy brews over asbestos deaths in Mexico*. February 12, 2010.
<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/controversy-brews-over-asbestos-deaths-in-mexico/article1467211/>

⁴ In 2007, 66% (11,050 tonnes) of Mexico’s total asbestos consumption of 16,676 tonnes came from Brazil.

How in the 21st century can a substance as hazardous as asbestos be freely transported across national borders. The answer is as simple as it is obvious: powerful vested interests have invested millions of dollars to prevent governments acting to protect populations. Of the dozens of countries in the Americas, only three – Argentina, Chile and Uruguay – have banned asbestos.⁵ The fact that asbestos industry funded bodies operate in strategically important countries and that these countries have not banned asbestos is not coincidental:

Country	Asbestos Trade Association
Brazil	Brazilian Chrysotile Institute (Instituto Brasileiro do Crisotila/IBC) which replaced The Brazilian Asbestos Institute (ABRA)
Canada	Chrysotile Institute (formerly the Asbestos Institute)
Colombia	Columbian Fiber Association (Asociacion Colombiana de Fibras)
Mexico	Mexican Institute of Fibro-Industry (Instituto Mexicano de Fibro-Industrias)
U.S.	Asbestos Information Association of North America

Conclusion: Vested interests, motivated solely by greed, continue to exert financial and political pressure to prevent asbestos from being banned

Of the scores of multinational bodies, agencies and groups working throughout the Americas,⁶ evidence of asbestos policies could not be found for any of them; the exception being the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). A search for asbestos on the PAHO website referred users to the WHO 2006 recommendation that asbestos use should be phased out. Enquiries on the asbestos policies of other multilateral agencies in the Americas remained unanswered. Considering this lack of response and data documenting the extensive use of asbestos in Chile,⁷ – in the seven year run up to the national ban (2001) ~40,000 tonnes were used – it is not unreasonable to be concerned about hazardous asbestos exposures in the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami in February 2010.⁸ Attempts to obtain information on current levels of asbestos pollution in affected areas of the country have not been fruitful. In light of Chile’s asbestos ban and increasing awareness of the asbestos hazard amongst responder agencies, it is reasonable to anticipate that asbestos will not be used in the reconstruction efforts. Confirmation,

⁵ It was difficult to find a definitive list of countries in the Americas; the estimates range from 25 to 47 (see: <http://new.paho.org/>).

⁶ These include: the: Andean Community of Nations, Association of Caribbean States, Bank of the South, CARICOM Single Market and Economy, Central American Common Market, Central American Parliament, Free Trade Area of the Americas, Latin American Free Trade Agreement, Latin American Parliament Or (Parlatino), Mercosur or Mercosul, North American Free Trade Agreement, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Organization of American States, Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States, Organization of Ibero-American States, Regional Security System, Union of South American Nations.

⁷ Data sourced from the U.S.G.S. on asbestos use in Chile is in Appendix A; from 1995-2001, when Chile banned asbestos, 39,558 tonnes were used; from the data available it appears that asbestos use in Chile peaked in 1995 at 11,666 tonnes.

⁸ See: Appendix A: Asbestos Consumption in Chile.

however, is essential not only for local people but also for those tasked with the clean-up and rebuilding work.

Conclusion: Global organizations, regional bodies, and national authorities in the Americas have neither acknowledged nor acted on the asbestos hazard; as a result of their malign neglect, millions of Americans have been exposed to the world's worst industrial killer – these exposures continue.

Nothing is more important than the sanctity of human life. As representatives from the U.S., Canada, and Brazil gather together for the 6th annual conference of the Asbestos Diseases Awareness Organization, we affirm our determination to end the misery caused by asbestos. We endorse the statements made in *The Call to the Americas – Ban Asbestos Now*⁹ and reiterate its urgent request for all Pan American regulatory bodies and governments to:

“...adopt policies calling for asbestos to be banned. Working with international bodies, they should set a timetable, no more than 2 years, for the implementation of asbestos prohibitions, delineate a strategy for achieving this objective, adopt a just transition for affected workers, and ensure that support and medical care for the asbestos-injured is provided. **We urge official bodies to work closely with those most affected by the asbestos epidemic – the asbestos victims – in all negotiations and consultations.**

To end the needless slaughter, an immediate commitment to ban asbestos, accompanied by a detailed action plan for achieving this objective, is essential; **the citizens of the Americas have the right to live a life free of asbestos pain and death.”**

⁹ The Spanish, Portuguese and French translations of the Call for the Americas can be viewed on the ADAO website: <http://www.asbestosdiseaseawareness.org/>

Appendix A

Asbestos Use in Chile

Year	Amount (tonnes)
1960	nil
1970	8800
1975	2000
1980	nil
1985	8387
1990	7749
1995	11666
1996	9349
1997	9198
1998	4937
1999	2296
2000	1811
2001	301