



Canada blocks inclusion of chrysotile asbestos in UN convention

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Canada has single-handedly blocked listing chrysotile asbestos as a hazardous chemical, the United Nations confirmed Wednesday, even as the Conservative government maintained its silence back home.

At a summit in Switzerland, Canada's delegation ended days of silence and speculation by opposing the inclusion of asbestos on a UN treaty called the Rotterdam Convention.

"Yes, I can confirm they intervened in the chemicals contact group meeting this afternoon and opposed listing," Michael Stanley-Jones of the UN Environment Program said in an e-mail.

Vietnam, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan also initially opposed the listing. However, Mr. Stanley-Jones said they switched positions after India announced it would support the listing.

That left Canada as the lone opposing voice.

"All had consented when Canada announced its position opposing listing," Mr. Stanley-Jones said.

Listing asbestos on Annex III of the convention would force exporters such as Canada to warn recipient countries of any health hazards. Those countries could also then refuse asbestos imports if they didn't think they could handle the product safely.

Asbestos use is so tightly controlled in Canada that it is effectively banned. The federal government is spending tens of millions of dollars to remove asbestos from public buildings, including on Parliament Hill and from the Prime Minister's residence.

Canada has twice before played a lead role in blocking the inclusion of asbestos under the Rotterdam Convention, which operates by consensus.

The New Democrats called the move the ultimate in hypocrisy.

"All India and the world are asking for is that we acknowledge what is true, that asbestos is dangerous and can kill you and needs to be labelled," NDP MP Nathan Cullen said.

"The Conservative government is living in some other universe in which asbestos is safe, while we spend billions of dollars in Canada ripping it out of our homes."

Until Wednesday, it appeared Canada's strategy was to abstain while other asbestos-exporting countries blocked the move.

“We haven’t taken a position opposed to the inscription. We haven’t, to my knowledge, there has been no position taken there,” Natural Resources Minister Joe Oliver said on Tuesday.

“The way it works at Rotterdam is that it’s determined by consensus and if there are countries that oppose, then it won’t happen. My understanding, and I’m not certain on this, but I understand that there are some countries that are in fact opposed.

“So the question is moot.”

Government departments were keeping tight-lipped about what position Canada took to Geneva. The governing Conservatives continue to claim that Canada’s chrysotile asbestos can be used safely “under controlled conditions.”

Environment Canada still wouldn’t disclose Canada’s position in Geneva – even after the UN confirmed it.

“With regards to your question on Rotterdam, our previous response that our position at Rotterdam will be the same as our position in Canada, which is that we promote the safe and controlled use of chrysotile, still stands,” the department said in an e-mail.

The department refused to answer a follow-up question.

Environment Minister Peter Kent said he wasn’t aware of the details around the vote, as he’s been busy with a Montreal meeting of environmental authorities from Canada, the United States and Mexico.

“The government, the Prime Minister has stated quite clearly that it’s a product that needs to be handled with care and our government and previous governments have certainly offered that caution and assurance,” he said on the sidelines of the meeting.

“But with regards to today’s events, I just haven’t been plugged [in]. I look forward to finding it out myself exactly what happened and how it happened.”

Also attending the meeting was Lisa Jackson, head of the United States Environmental Protection Agency.

She said she did not want to comment directly on what happened with the Rotterdam Convention, because she hadn’t yet been briefed. But she said the U.S. has struggled to ban asbestos in manufacturing and commerce because of a court case that set a high barrier for what chemicals can and cannot be banned. It is still used in commerce today, she said.

“Our concerns remain with respect to the respiratory impacts of repeated and prolonged exposure to asbestos – we think the science is clear on that,” Ms. Jackson said.

“I would also say that we believe that like asbestos, there are other chemicals that have not been adequately regulated in order to protect the average citizen.”

Canada’s position, although not surprising given its public support of the asbestos industry, still left anti-asbestos activists fuming.

“It is absolutely incredible. Canada has just thumbed its nose at the whole world,” human-rights activist Kathleen Ruff said in an e-mail.

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