

# B.C. INDUSTRY APPLAUDS LONG OVERDUE ASBESTOS REGULATIONS

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British Columbia's construction industry is applauding a new move by the feds to clamp down on asbestos, but there is still work to be done.

The Government of Canada recently proposed a new set of regulations to prohibit the sale, use, import and export of asbestos, and products that contain the substance as well as the manufacture of products containing asbestos. The government is also asking for public and industry feedback until March 22.

"The asbestos disease issue is something that shows us we need to better manage occupational exposures, and not just asbestos but all those chemicals and components we find in the workplace," said BC Insulators business manager Lee Loftus.

*It's going to be half a century until we see the elimination of asbestos death and disease from our workplaces, — Lee Loftus, BC Insulators*

Loftus added he attended a conference two years ago where Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced his government would ban asbestos.

"All I can say is thank God. It's about time that Canada stepped up to the plate," he said.

"We are one of the last modern countries that have made that commitment."

Loftus said he expects to see an official ban in place by the end of 2018, "and maybe we'll stop that carnage into the future as a result. I wish we were leading and not just following, but I'm glad it's happening."

He cautioned, however, that there will still be asbestos-related deaths for the next 30 to 40 years just from exposures that happen until the end of 2018.

"It's going to be half a century until we see the elimination of asbestos death and disease from our workplaces," he stated.

In fact, statistics for 2017 indicate worksite deaths have gone up from the previous year, due to now measuring exposure as a cause of death in the workplace.

"The numbers have gone up I think 42 per cent over last year, and most of those are due to exposures," explained BC Building Trades executive director Tom Sigurdson. "Of 27 fatalities due to exposure, 25 of those were due to asbestos."

"What doesn't get covered off at a federal level will get covered at a provincial level," Loftus added, citing changes to the building code and restrictions on asbestos use for construction materials.

"I'm not sure what the exemptions are going to be, but I think they're going to be very minimal."

Sigurdson also expressed optimism about the new regulations but cautioned that enforcement is key to ensuring worker safety.

"This is another step in the right direction, but we've had those steps before. What we have to make absolutely certain that we get is enforcement," he said. "I can't imagine that without enforcement, we'll make all that much of a difference."

WorkSafeBC vice-president of prevention services Al Johnson said while banning asbestos in new buildings is laudable, his organization is focused on the harmful effects of asbestos in existing buildings.

"Our real push through our asbestos campaign is to ensure that exposures don't occur. We truly believe if you can prevent those exposures today, you can eradicate the disease into the future," Johnson said.

For Loftus, the regulations are something of a personal victory.

“I’ve been fighting asbestos and asbestos disease since I was a teenager. As a teenager, I was exposed at one of my first jobs in the early 1970s. I’ve watched family, co-workers and mothers and fathers lose their life as a result of their exposures,” Loftus said. “I’ve been battling regulators and legislators since 1981 to have the laws changed and I’m pleased we’re finally here.”