

B.C. taking steps to address asbestos

Mineral already accounting for 75 per cent of occupational disease deaths this year

British Columbia has established a cross-ministry working group to ensure that individuals are adequately protected from the dangers of asbestos.

Asbestos-related diseases are the leading cause of workplace deaths in the province due to significant workplace exposures 20 or 30 years ago.

According to WorkSafeBC, from 2007-16, there were over 600 accepted claims for worker deaths in B.C. related to asbestos exposures, with the majority of those workers dying before the age of 65 years.

"The Government of British Columbia supports Canada moving toward a national ban on asbestos by 2018, and we want to make sure we are doing all that we can to protect British Columbians and our environment from asbestos hazards. This working group will look at this issue from a cross-government perspective to ensure our number-one priority is protecting British Columbians from the dangers of asbestos, and will engage with important partners as the work progresses," said Minister of Jobs, Tourism and Skills Training and Minister Responsible for Labour Shirley Bond.

Asbestos is a naturally occurring fibrous material that was used extensively in construction from the 1950s to 1990s due to its low cost, resistance to fire and insulating properties. It is commonly present in spray-applied fireproofing, mechanical insulation, linoleum, floor tiles, drywall taping compound, vermiculite, cement board and tiles, cement pipes and textured decorative coating.

The asbestos working group will take a broad approach and work collaboratively to identify, review and report on a range of issues, including worker safety, building renovation and abatement matters, environmental protection and public health and awareness.

WorkSafeBC, which will be part of the new working group, has done a lot of work with employers to ensure they are protecting their workers from asbestos, and has recently launched an awareness campaign for homeowners of the potential dangers during renovations. Progress has been made to raise awareness, establish more rigorous inspection and compliance efforts and expand enforcement capabilities.

WorkSafeBC officers have conducted more than 3,900 work site asbestos-related inspections from 2013-16 and issued 183 fines.

However, since asbestos continues to be found in many industrial, commercial and residential building materials, and in motor vehicle parts and other industrial and consumer products, it remains a public health and environmental challenge that can impact British Columbians throughout the province, the provincial government said.

WorkSafeBC preliminary stats for 2016 indicate asbestos exposure was the contributing factor in 64 work-related deaths, accounting for 75 per cent of all occupational disease deaths and about 44 per cent of all accepted deaths in the year.

The working group expects to submit its recommendations by the end of 2017.