

New NZ asbestos import rules are not 'green' enough

This month another case of asbestos suffering was reported in New Zealand, prompting customs broker and CEO of Platinum Freight Management PETER MCRAE* to question if New Zealand is 'green' enough about asbestos, after introduction of a 'conditional ban' on asbestos imports just seven months back.

IN OCTOBER 2016, the Imports and Exports (Asbestos –containing Products) Prohibition Order 2016 was implemented in New Zealand, 13 years after Australia ruled a total ban and 17 years after the UK did the same. At the time I argued it was too little, too late, but now that more time has asked, and more asbestos cases take action I ask again, are the new rules enough? The answer is no. NZ needs to meet benchmarks set by other developed nations.

The Order prohibits the importation of products containing asbestos into New Zealand. Well, that's what it should do but in actual fact it doesn't. It prohibits asbestos-containing imports unless a permit is obtained from the Environment Protection Authority (EPA).

The parameters for permits to import products containing asbestos are infuriating. Products containing asbestos are permitted for importing if:

- There is no other asbestos-free product available;
- The cost of using an asbestos-free product would be significantly higher;
- The product is to be used for research and development or training.

I wonder how the families of the 5000 New Zealanders who have died

from exposure to asbestos would feel about the Government permitting asbestos imports because it's cheaper?

WorkSafe New Zealand is aware of the risks and concerns of Asbestos, yet since 1993 New Zealand Customs Service (NZCS) has had no power to stop asbestos entering the country. The 2016 order still handcuffs NZCS allowing them only the power to stop shipments that don't have an EPA permit. Hugely dysfunctional.

What riles me further too, is that while the NZCS and Worksafe have been admitting asbestos into New Zealand for decades longer than comparable countries, but if a NZ building site is found to contain [unreported] asbestos, Worksafe will impose a significant fine – or even ban – on the builder. Why should a builder be a scapegoat for government's poor measures?

A total ban is the first step towards protecting the New Zealand people from exposure to asbestos.

The second step then is to work globally to ensure that at ports around the world, authorities including NZCS test imported products that are labelled as asbestos-free to ensure they actually are asbestos-free.

A spate of asbestos-related incidents occurred in Australia last year after the NZ order was imposed. The majority of these imported products containing asbestos are coming from

China because importers choose to buy from there due to price. The manufacturer provides the relevant certificates to the authorities to show they are asbestos-free, but in some cases these certificates are years out of date or fake. New Zealand builders find the same products here popular for the same reasons. That's why a total ban is only the first step and the compliance testing is also critical. This is where NZ is not alone – Australia's compliance testing is also virtually non-existent.

I believe that if the NZ government continues its reluctance to fully ban and test for asbestos then it will be another sad 50 years of health risk to ordinary people, which other countries are already working hard to mitigate.

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Photo: Platinum Freight Management

