

## An Open Letter to Christchurch and New Zealand Authorities

by Deidre vanGerven

Lord knows we have waited long enough for the rebuilding of Christchurch. In the eighteen months since the earthquake devastated sections of Christchurch, lives have remained on hold and businesses have remained in a state of suspended animation. Frustration levels are high amongst citizens and business leaders; a recent survey found that 56% of chief executives felt insufficient progress was being made.

So, it is with some sense of relief that we welcomed the news of a major international deal to rebuild Christchurch. As with most things, however, the devil is in the detail. The firm which has signed a memorandum of understanding with New Zealand's Arrow International is China State Construction Engineering Corporation. There is no doubt that the Chinese conglomerate is a world player; it was ranked the world's biggest contractor in 2012.

Arrow has publicly stated that the deal will provide "access to a highly cost-effective supply chain," which will help reduce inflated prices for building materials. Arrow personnel will collaborate with Chinese colleagues with a view to sourcing some building products in China.

China is the world's biggest user of raw chrysotile asbestos and the second most important source of asbestos fiber. In 2012, China consumed 530,834 tonnes/t and produced 420,000t of asbestos; in 2011, these figures were 637,735t and 440,000t. The use of chrysotile asbestos in China is legal and the export by China of asbestos-containing products to countries where asbestos has been banned has been documented.

This government is quite happy to allow products containing asbestos to be bought into New Zealand according to a letter received by me in October 2009 from the Hon. Dr. Nick Smith, Minister for the Environment.

There is no comprehensive list of the products that contain asbestos that may currently be imported into New Zealand. However, I can advise that the types of products that may contain asbestos are cement sheets, friction materials and articles such as clutch pads and gaskets. The situation with asbestos-containing products is different. No HSNO approval from ERMA is required

Also in a letter received by me in February 2013, the Hon. Amy Adams, the Associate Minister for Canterbury Earthquake Recover, wrote: "New Zealand does not monitor the importation of asbestos products..."

As New Zealand's monitoring of imports is woefully inadequate, there are grounds for concern regarding the potential for the import of asbestos-contaminated building products from China. What guarantees are there by Arrow International or the China State Construction Engineering Corporation that all work undertaken in Christchurch will be carried out with asbestos-free materials. We have a right to know.

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