

Lesson learned from asbestos ban in England ...will the English asbestos ban history haunt Thailand?

Reported by Charnwit Inyanna, Thansettakij Newspaper

On April 12, 2011, the Cabinet has resolved in principle to the proposal from the Health Assembly to make Thailand asbestos-free society by banning the use of goods and also the imports of Chrysotile-containing products. Chrysotile is the important ingredient in producing high pressure cement tiles or asbestos tiles i.e. double curved tile products, tile sheets, vinyl tile for laying floors and including cement pipe, heat-proof product that has been used for 50 years in Thailand. The main reason that has been claimed for asbestos ban is cancer inducing agent. The latest news is that the government has delayed to enact the laws to for 3-5 years to study the impacts carefully before whole country's production of asbestos-containing products will be cancelled and the asbestos imports will be permanently banned.

Lesson learned from England

To prove whether the production and the use of Chrysotile-containing products are harm or not, during September 15-19, "Thansettakij" was one of the media which had been invited from The National Farmers Union (NFU) to visit and have a talk with the farmers and ranch owners who were affected by the asbestos ban policy in England.

Mr. Brian K Edgly, Chair of Farmer Union of Buckinghamshire and South Middlesex gave the information that there were two groups of asbestos, the first group was amphibole asbestos which was blue or brown fiber asbestos and the second group was Chrysotile asbestos whose chemical composition was totally different from the amphibole. Amphibole group comprised of ferrous silicate which could deposit in the lung for years and led to fatal diseases i.e. pleural and peritoneal mesothelioma. The Chrysotile group, on the contrary, was white soft fiber of magnesium silicate which could easily and rapidly be metabolized from the lung because it could not stand the acid in human body.

Farmers affected 0.3 trillion

There are no more amphibole asbestos mines in England after the Second World War (WW II). During WW II, amphibole asbestos was used as one of the main components in military tank manufacturing as a result of the good properties of amphibole as good binding, heat resistant and strengthening agents. 30-40 years aftermath, plenty of soldiers had been died from the cancer. For Chrysotile asbestos, European Union (EU) has banned it since 2006.

Now there have been nearly 50000 members of National Farmer Union (NFU) of England greatly affected by the Chrysotile asbestos ban from the law enforcement to remove 50-year-old Chrysotile roof-tiles and ban other Chrysotile containing products. It is time for the new Chrysotile-free materials which the cost of new material is much higher whereas the farm building will have to be demolished by contractors according to new Asbestos Control Act. The farm owners have to pay for that demolition and also the transportation and elimination cost of asbestos trash.

The government has only enforced the ban regardless of scientific evidence and this will cause unnecessary expenses to English farmers as much as 6 billion pounds (approx 0.3 trillion baht).

It's too late

Farmer Union has urged the members about the ban. Seminar has been held and information has been distributed to their members to understand the current situation. Farmer Union also moved to pressure the government for reconsidering that ban by conducting political movement through the Representatives for House of Representatives' debate and has also appealed to the Supreme Court against the ban. The Supreme Court, however, rejected the petition by claiming that the government has enacted the ban for a long time, so it meant that stakeholders have accepted the ban and why just filed the petition.

“The ban has been enacted since 2006 but at the beginning the farmers have neglected it for the thoughts of irrelevance to their own work. As time has passed, the ban has gradually affected and they have begun to campaign against the ban for 5-6 years. Although the request for reconsidering the ban was not successful, we have still tried to fight in politics incessantly. For the economic effect from the ban, I will give you the example from one livestock building. I have to pay for the expenses of demolition, new asbestos substitute material and asbestos trash elimination as high as 42 thousand pounds (or 2.1M baht).”

This is in consistent with the revelation of Ms. Sally Stockings, Chair of Swine Farmers in Middlesex that she has used the asbestos roof tiles in her swine building for 40 years, if they are broken or have to be changed from their lifespan, high amounts of money will be paid for new replacement undoubtedly. NFU has indicated that in Middlesex area more than 100 swine farms have already been shut down from the loss as a result of increasingly high cost after asbestos ban has been enacted.

Chair of the National Swine Farmers of Thailand (NSFT) soaring for ban

Mr. Surachai Sutthitham, Chair of NSFT, who had also joined the journalists' group to visit farms in England said that from English farmers' perspective if there will be asbestos ban as well as Chrysotile asbestos containing products in Thailand and there will be the use of asbestos substitute material, there will be the marked impact widely on agriculture, livestock, household, public and private and other sectors for not less than 500 billion baht from changing the whole system's material to asbestos debris elimination and is expected that the government will be responsible for all costs and provide the substitute which is at least as good quality material as the asbestos if the ban will be enacted for real. For the past 50 years, there has been no scientific evidence that asbestos roof tiles and water cement pipes harm people or the cause of cancer and no report that workers in any asbestos roof tile factories been ill from asbestos tile and therefore I myself did not agree for the government to enact the asbestos ban.

Asbestos Roof Tile Producer indicated “game of advantages”

One big producer of asbestos roof tiles shared his opinion that if there would be asbestos ban (asbestos ore and asbestos products) in Thailand, the advantages would be fallen into many groups, the lawyers who could claim for their clients without proving the cause of illness whether it was from the asbestos or not, the doctors who diagnosed the patients and could claim for illness from asbestos as most Thais contacted the asbestos roof tiles every day, some producers who now had changed the production line to Chrysotile free products and the politicians who hurried to establish the Fund for Victim Groups suffered from Asbestos and would be the pitfall of corruption. The government should consider carefully about this.

Picture 1 (First page: Thai female reporte chatting with Mr. Bryan) : Mr. Bryan ‘s livestock building that lost the opportunity from the rent. (because he used the asbestos roof tiles)

Picture 2 up (asbestos roof tiles and the man holding two bottles of milk) : Cow milk of Will Lazi will be banned from local retailers if he still uses asbestos roof tiles.

Picture 2 down (group of people photo taken): UK-Thai farmers joined the seminar the impact of asbestos ban