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The Pacific environment, sustaining our livelihoods and natural heritage in harmony with our cultures.

Twenty Eighth SPREP Meeting of Officials

Apia, Samoa
19 – 21 September 2017

Agenda Item 13.1: Items Proposed by Members:

The need for a Pacific wide ban on asbestos

(Paper presented by representative of Cook Islands)



Government of the Cook Islands

Background Paper

Purpose:

1. To seek endorsement and commitment from Members to develop and implement a Pacific wide ban on the importation, re-sale and re-use of products containing asbestos.

Background

2. Asbestos is a group of naturally occurring rock fibres that are harmful to humans. When products containing asbestos are damaged or wear down over time, small fibres are released and can become airborne. Breathing in asbestos fibres can cause a range of diseases including cancer. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that globally, more than 100,000 people die each year from illnesses related to asbestos exposure.
3. *An Asbestos Free Pacific – A Regional Strategy and Action Plan* was adopted at the 22nd SPREP Meeting (Samoa) in 2011. The strategy was co-sponsored by SPREP and WHO. This strategy outlined the serious potential health risks that asbestos materials and wastes pose in the Pacific if not managed appropriately.
4. This strategy paved the way for taking action on existing asbestos materials and wastes (primarily building materials) in the Pacific, through the EUR 7.85 million, European Union funded and SPREP-administered Pacific Hazardous Waste Management project (PacWaste).
5. In 2013/14 the PacWaste project conducted the Pacific's first Regional Asbestos Baseline Survey across 26 islands in 13 Pacific island countries. The survey found:
 - widespread asbestos in seven Pacific island countries in public, commercial and residential buildings;
 - asbestos materials being reused and resold in several locations (Nauru, Samoa, FSM, RMI, Niue); and
 - 'new asbestos' sheeting materials for sale at hardware stores in the Solomon Islands (Gizo) and in Vanuatu (Luganville).
6. The results from the Regional Asbestos Baseline Survey concluded that more than USD 150 million would be needed to remove/replace all the asbestos identified in the locations surveyed and that new asbestos materials are now being imported into the Pacific region primarily from Asia. Studies in Australia and New Zealand also confirm widespread import of asbestos containing products in building materials, brake shoes, gaskets and insulation products coming into those countries as well.
7. The WHO and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) maintain that the only way to eliminate asbestos related diseases is to stop the use of all types of asbestos in products and has identified that there are safer substitutes available in almost all products where asbestos has previously been or continues to be used which is confirmed in recent New Zealand studies (Annex 1)
8. Currently, asbestos materials can be lawfully imported and used in Pacific island countries and territories. This hampers both the original goal of Regional Asbestos Strategy to achieve an 'Asbestos Free Pacific' and the efforts of asbestos removal projects such as PacWaste and the upcoming PacWaste Plus project which is funded through the 11th European Development Fund.

9. While efforts are underway to reduce legacy asbestos stockpiles and dispose of it correctly, further action is needed at the regional and national level to prevent new asbestos coming into the region and to prevent existing asbestos from being reused.
10. At the 27th SPREP Meeting in Niue (2016), SPREP sought support from Members to endorse a Pacific-wide asbestos ban. In principal, this proposal received very strong support from the Meeting but, at the time, there were concerns from Members – including Cook Islands – as to how the implementation of such a ban would be resourced. In the time that has passed since the last Meeting a number of important developments have taken place.
11. In October 2016, New Zealand became the 58th country to enact a national ban on asbestos. Between October 2016 and July 2017 a further four countries implemented bans on asbestos taking the total number of national bans to 62.
12. In May 2017 in Geneva, Pacific Island Parties to the Rotterdam Convention (Cook Islands, Tonga, Samoa and Republic of the Marshall Islands) spoke in strong support of the listing of chrysotile asbestos on Annex III of the Rotterdam Convention. The intervention was also supported by Kiribati which was present at the Convention but is not a Party. This proposal failed to be adopted for the sixth consecutive time due to opposition from a small number of Parties that are associated with the trade of asbestos and asbestos-containing materials. The full statement is attached as Annex 2.
13. Between September 2016 and June 2017, representatives from Nauru, Tonga, European Union, Solomon Islands and SPREP have spoken publically in support of a Pacific-wide ban on asbestos, noting that the continued production of products containing asbestos combined with an increased number of countries that have enacted bans, leaves small island states vulnerable to an increased volume of building materials containing asbestos. A summary of these public statements is attached as Annex 3.
14. Since the previous SPREP Meeting serious incidents involving asbestos have been documented in five Pacific island countries.
15. Concerns previously raised by Members around resourcing, capacity, and monitoring for a Pacific-wide asbestos ban have been addressed through the formulation of the Action Document for the EDF11-funded PacWaste Plus project.
16. Concerns raised by Members about the implications of a ban on WTO membership have been addressed through the provision, by the Secretariat, of papers (attached as Annex 4) that clarify that WTO Membership is not impacted by the ban of asbestos.
17. Given the above, Cook Islands, Tonga and Australia are convinced that the time is right to move forward on properly addressing the issue of new asbestos in the Pacific. In preparing this paper, Cook Islands has received letters of support from the representatives of the Tongan Government, and Australian Government which are attached as Annex 5.

Recommendations

18. The Meeting is invited to:

- **note** the information provided in this paper;
 - **note** letters of support in favour of a Pacific wide asbestos ban provided by the Tongan and Australian Government representatives
 - **note** the work conducted by the EU-funded PacWaste project that has contributed significant resources to asbestos remediation, monitoring and awareness across 13 Pacific island countries;
 - **note** the threat posed by new asbestos to Pacific island communities;
 - **endorse** the development and implementation of a Pacific-wide ban on the importation, re-use and re-sale of products and wastes containing asbestos; and
 - **direct** the Secretariat to progress work on the development and implementation of such as ban, in collaboration with SPREP Members, to be resourced through Cleaner Pacific 2025 and PacWaste Plus.
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Annex 1: New Zealand Inventory Report 2014

Annex 2: Statement from Pacific Island Parties to the Rotterdam Convention

Annex 3: Summary of public statements in support of a Pacific wide ban on asbestos

Annex 4: Information papers on the implications of asbestos bans on WTO membership

Annex 5: Letters of support from the Tongan and Australian Governments