

[Print this story](#) | [Close window](#)

# Mail & Guardianonline

## www.mg.co.za

### Deadly dust ban

Yolandi Groenewald

31 August 2005 09:00

Asbestos and asbestos products are to be wiped from the face of South Africa. In terms of draft legislation approved by the Cabinet recently, no one will be allowed to mine, process, import, export, sell or even transport the dangerous mineral.

"For too many years communities across South Africa have lived with the dangers of asbestos and asbestos products," Marthinus van Schalkwyk, Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, told the *Mail & Guardian*. "We are now taking the final steps to ensure that this health hazard never again threatens our people and our communities."

Companies still using asbestos products will have 120 days after the regulations are promulgated to phase out the mineral.

Asbestos is a fibrous material that was formerly mined at a number of sites in South Africa. Because of its excellent resistance to heat, it was used in the manufacture of products such as vehicle brake linings.

However, it can produce fatal diseases if lodged, even in tiny quantities, in the lungs. South Africa is thought to have the world's highest rate of mesothelioma, an aggressive and terminal lung cancer caused by exposure to asbestos, and one of the highest rates of asbestosis.

Official figures show that the mineral was responsible for 100 000 of the 340 000 workers' deaths ascribed to hazardous substances in 2003. In the same year, South African mineworkers successfully sued Gencor for R380-million. In 2001, they won a damages award of £7,5-million from British-based mining company Cape Plc.

Van Schalkwyk warned that there are still a limited number of products for which no effective or immediate alternative exists. In these cases, a phase-out plan will be developed and approved by the government.

As other Southern African Development Community countries, such as Swaziland, still rely on asbestos exports, the regulations will allow South Africa to be used as a transit point for some materials, as long as they are not reprocessed or repackaged here.

Van Schalkwyk said the economic impact on South Africa was expected to be minimal, especially when compared with the healthcare savings.

"There has been a dramatic decline of 39% in local asbestos consumption from more than 12 600 tonnes in 2000 to just over 7 700 tonnes in 2002," he said. "There are also fewer than 200 people employed in the domestic asbestos industry, and it is increasingly feasible to replace asbestos with alternative fibres."



Asbestosis sufferers  
Magaret Thembu and  
her sister, Eva Gouws.  
Asbestos dust claimed  
the life of Thembu's  
husband and one of her  
sons. (Photograph:  
AP/Obed Zilwa)

A National Economic Development and Labour Council study indicated short-term savings of a complete ban on asbestos of about R27-million a year in compensation and health costs.

Van Schalkwyk said that despite the closure of all asbestos mines, the finalisation of codes to guide the demolition and disposal of materials containing asbestos, and even specifications for asbestos-free vehicle brakes, the mineral continues to pose a very real threat.

"We have seen increases over the past four years in cases of asbestosis, and other medical conditions associated with exposure, in persons who were never associated with asbestos mines," he remarked.

The minister is also concerned that there are very few ways for the public to handle these products safely -- especially in poorer communities in which less expensive asbestos products are used, instead of safer alternatives.