

Heart of Canada's asbestos country reinvents itself

March 11 2012, by Guillaume Lavallee



A former asbestos plant is shown in February 2012 in Thetford Mines, Quebec, Canada. Thetford Mines was known in the past as the world capital of asbestos but with the decline of the controversial industry the town has managed to diversify its local industry.

It's an unlikely match, but a green chemistry institute is thriving in the old headquarters of a Canadian mine in a sign that the former world capital of asbestos is diversifying.

"We started with just two friends and two desks in an office, with no computer," recalled David Berthiaume, who runs Oleotek, a research center that develops industrial products from [vegetable oils](#) and animal fats, rather than oil byproducts.

The oleochemistry center, which now has a team of 11 a decade after its

launch, has since migrated to spacious premises next to the former [asbestos](#) mine in Thetford Mines.

The city along with the nearby town of Asbestos benefited in the 1960s from the extraction of huge [mineral deposits](#) of the material banned by Europe in 2005.

A carcinogenic product, asbestos was long used in construction, where it was favored for its resistance to heat and fire.

But over the past 25 years the asbestos industry has collapsed, forcing Thetford Mines, a city of 25,700 inhabitants some 240 kilometers (150 miles) east of Montreal, to adapt its [economic model](#) to the changing times.

"We gave this some thought around here. We said to ourselves, 'apart from asbestos, what else could we produce here?'" explained Berthiaume, 36.



David Berthiaume, 36, owner and Cyril Devauchelle of Oleotek a green company based in the former headquarters of an asbestos mining company are shown in February 2012 in Thetford Mines, Quebec, Canada. Oleotek, is a research institute devoted to the development of industrial products from

vegetable oil and animal fat, rather than petroleum.

His center has since launched a first start-up, Innoltek, which produces non-toxic concrete form release oil for the construction and precast concrete markets.

Once a mono-industrial city riddled with craters and slag heaps of snow-capped mining debris, Thetford Mines has since made huge strides in opening up its economy to new industries, from manufacturing and transportation to tourism, [wind energy](#) and research.

"In 20 years, 1,000 more jobs were created than were lost, but the salaries are not the same," said the city's Mayor Luc Berthold.

The average salary in Thetford Mines was among the highest in Canada during the 1970s, due to the extra compensation paid for working in risky mining jobs.

"People who worked in the mining sector had special training, whether in tinsmithing, mechanics, welding, etc. It was a good place to foster new businesses because there was specialized labor," said Luc Remillard, president of the local economic development agency.

There is no public data on the unemployment rate in the city, but the Chaudières-Appalaches region that includes Thetford Mines has 5.7 percent unemployment, according to the Quebec Institute of Statistics. Remillard estimated Thetford Mines is on equal par with the regional figures.

For the first time in 130 years, Canada no longer produces asbestos. The Jeffrey Mine located in Asbestos -- until recently the world's biggest

asbestos mine -- is now shuttered.

But it could soon receive a CAN\$58 million (US\$58.5 million) loan guarantee from the Quebec government to resume activities in the spring, despite protests from a local coalition asking authorities to halt further investments in the asbestos industry.

After a cave-in, LAB Chrysotile closed its Lake Asbestos Mine in October, near Thetford Mines. After going into bankruptcy, it is now seeking a new investor to start its operations back up again.

Despite the success of its economic diversification and the risks associated with asbestos, Thetford [Mines](#) officials are adamant about relaunching the Lake Asbestos Mine, which once employed 350 workers.

"Replacing 350 jobs with small businesses takes time. The easiest way for us to keep an active economy is to safeguard our mining operations," Berthold said.

"I don't have a miracle solution. We've been looking for five years for a big business to create 350-400 jobs here, but they don't come a dime a dozen."

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