

ASBESTOS Importing death

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ASBESTOS IS NO LONGER MINED in the United States. Most Americans think it's not used here, either. They're dead wrong.

Over the past 12 years, imports of potentially hazardous asbestos brake material have increased 300 percent, Andrew Schneider reported in last Sunday's *Post-Dispatch*. A new generation of workers - in this case, auto mechanics - continues to be exposed to dangerous asbestos fibers known to cause a nasty type of cancer called mesothelioma. Like earlier generations of shipyard workers and pipefitters, most have no idea they're handling a hazardous material.

The surge in imports comes as concern over asbestos litigation has led Congress to consider closing the courthouse doors to workers sickened by on-the-job exposure, and as a high-powered international law firm is trying to stop the Environmental Protection Agency from educating workers about the mineral's dangers.

EPA regulations issued in 1989 banned importing, mining or manufacturing products containing asbestos. But the ban was overturned. Many Americans still believe asbestos is no longer on the market. If a Philadelphia law firm has its way, the few government warnings about the dangers of asbestos could be silenced.

For 17 years, the EPA has been publishing a booklet called "Guidance for Preventing Asbestos Disease Among Auto Mechanics." But the law firm of Morgan, Lewis & Bockius recently petitioned the EPA to stop distributing that booklet, arguing that it's based on unproven science. The firm won't disclose its client.

Even in this cynical age, when legislators exhibit greater concern for the financial health of polluters than for the physical well-being of their workers, the law firm's actions display a level of misanthropic malevolence rarely seen outside the tobacco industry. Scientific evidence gathered over the past 17 years confirms the deadly results of inhaling asbestos fibers. Federal and state governments should be doing more, not less, to warn and protect workers.

Congress should simply ban asbestos. A partial ban is included in legislation that would move asbestos cases out of the courtroom and establish a system of compensating victims. But that measure is bogged down. At issue is the size of a trust fund that would pay out compensation. Labor groups and their congressional supporters say the fund is too small to make payments to all of the victims. Business groups and their congressional friends counter that it reflects the best possible deal that can be achieved.

Even if, as seems increasingly likely, the measure cannot attract enough votes to win passage this year, Congress can still act. A separate bill by Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., would slam the door on future asbestos imports. It should be approved without delay.