

## **Proposed law worries local asbestos victims**

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Two major pieces of Republican-sponsored legislation to protect businesses from both general and specific kinds of lawsuits have been combined into a single bill heading for the Senate floor this week.

The two bills, SB1125 and SB274, were introduced by Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, and deal respectively with asbestos litigation and class-action lawsuits.

Many Puebloans who worked at the former CF&I Steel have received letters from attorneys urging them to call their senators and congressman to voice opposition to SB1125, warning that it threatens any future medical benefits they could receive if their health deteriorates because of asbestos exposure.

One of them is Jesus Rosales, a 44-year veteran of the steel mill who retired in 1994 and has received a number of payments from settlements with companies that supplied or installed asbestos at the plant.

While he hasn't developed a life-threatening disease, he has been diagnosed with asbestos-related health problems and worries that he may not get any benefits if he does become seriously ill.

The bill would effectively limit litigation and set up strict standards for who could receive benefits.

Insurance companies and firms that have been sued would contribute equally to a \$90 billion fund that would be used to pay benefits to asbestos victims.

Supporters say it would protect victims because many companies sued in asbestos cases will file bankruptcy. A Halliburton subsidiary did just that and will pay its claims out of the bankruptcy reorganization.

Another recipient of asbestos benefits in Pueblo is County Commissioner Matt Peulen, also a longtime CF&I worker who has been active in retiree issues.

Peulen said it was Ted Lopez, another retiree, who joined with him in getting many CF&I workers covered in the lawsuits that resulted in benefit payments. The United Steelworkers later joined in, he said, and even more workers were covered.

Under the class-action legislation, class-action lawsuits in which the primary defendant and fewer than one-third of the plaintiffs were from the same state would be heard in federal court. Any class-action suit with more than one-third of plaintiffs and the primary defendant from the same state still could be heard in state court. At least \$5 million would have to be at stake for a class-action lawsuit to be heard in federal court.

Supporters of the class-action legislation say they have at least 57 Senate votes - three shy of a filibuster-proof majority. "We're very close to getting the votes we need," Sen. Rick Santorum, R-Penn., said.

A number of groups, including the American Association of Retired Persons, have opposed the bill.

*The Associated Press contributed to this report.*