

Sen. Hatch asks companies to work on asbestos bill

WASHINGTON, Sept 9 (Reuters) - With the outlook rough for an asbestos reform bill in Congress, the main sponsor said on Tuesday he had asked insurers and asbestos companies to try to reach a deal that could help rescue the measure.

Utah Republican Sen. Orrin Hatch said Senate Republican Leader Bill Frist had agreed to bring the asbestos proposal up for a vote this autumn, but Hatch is hoping to firm up the weak support for the bill before it comes to the Senate floor.

"I've asked the insurers and companies to get together and see what they can do," he told reporters on Capitol Hill. "I intend to push the bill as it is unless they can come up with some accommodations."

Hatch's bill, which passed the Judiciary Committee in July on a near party-line vote, would end asbestos lawsuits and instead compensate people sickened by the mineral from a trust funded supported by business and insurers.

But insurers say they are being asked to pay too much into the proposed trust fund, and Republican support for the measure is eroding as a result. Asked if the funding could be rearranged to accommodate the insurers, Hatch replied, "I'm working on a whole bunch of possibilities."

He said he is also trying to address the concerns of Democrats who say the fund's payouts to victims are too low. But he did not believe he could increase the overall size of the proposed fund, which he said was between \$108 billion and \$139 billion -- not \$153 billion as earlier estimated.

"There's no way we can put more money into this without blowing it apart," Hatch said. Asbestos was widely used for fireproofing and insulation until the 1970s, when scientists concluded that inhaled fibers could be linked to cancer and other diseases. Injury claims have driven 67 U.S. firms into bankruptcy.

Spokesmen for business and insurers said they had no details of any talks but were happy to keep pursuing a solution, in hopes of ending asbestos-related lawsuits. "The bill as it is currently structured is unacceptable to us," said Julie Rochman, spokeswoman for the American Insurance Association, representing property and casualty insurers. "But we still want a bill, and we'll talk with anyone who will listen."

Hatch's comments were "very encouraging," said Jan Amundson, spokeswoman for the National Association of Manufacturers. "We are always willing to work with any of the parties to try to get this resolved."