

## US Chamber: Asbestos pushed back in Senate queue

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Insurers and asbestos companies may take two more months to reach a deal to rescue asbestos legislation, because other items on the Senate's agenda have reduced the pressure for agreement, U.S. Chamber of Commerce President Tom Donohue said on Thursday.

Donohue said that while he wanted businesses to decide on what they would be willing to pay into an asbestos trust proposed by Utah Sen. Orrin Hatch, there was less incentive to do so if a Senate vote on the proposal could not be held soon.

Other pressing matters are coming before the Senate, such as another spending bill for the Iraq war and an energy bill, Donohue said after a meeting with Senate Republican Leader Bill Frist.

"There won't be a deal (on asbestos) for a couple of months because you see everything that is queued up" before the Senate, Donohue told reporters at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce offices in Washington.

"What I really don't want to do is end up with a bill and agreement and then sit around for six or eight weeks (waiting for a vote) while everybody gets the chance to re-analyze it, rethink it, and beat the hell out of it," he added.

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 fund of up to \$139 billion, 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.

At Hatch's request, some insurers and manufacturers have been meeting in the last couple of weeks to try and reach a new arrangement on who would pay what into the trust fund.

Congressional aides said they are discussing a framework that would commit asbestos-labile companies to an upfront payment of \$52 billion, with insurers matching that amount over a longer period of time.

Labor unions must also be consulted, Donohue said. He said Frist pledged to call a Senate vote on the asbestos bill "when and if we get a reasonable agreement between all the players, and that's the insurance industry, the manufacturers, and labor unions."

"He (Frist) is going to enter into the discussions himself to try to find a way to solution," Donohue said of Frist. A Frist spokesman could not be reached for comment.

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