



Japan Asbestos Group Lobbying Delayed Laws - Report

TOKYO - Lobbying by a Japanese asbestos industry group pressured lawmakers into abandoning a proposed bill in 1992 that would have banned use, sales and manufacture of the cancer-causing material, a leading daily said on Saturday.

A recent surge in the number of reported deaths linked to asbestos 25 years after the first world health warnings has sparked accusations of government negligence over its policies on asbestos.

The World Health Organization warned in 1980 that asbestos was a carcinogen, but Japan did not ban the two most toxic kinds of asbestos until 1995. It only prohibited its use in all kinds of construction last year and decided last week to ban it completely -- in 2008.

According to the daily Mainichi Shimbun, the banning of asbestos by Italy and Finland prompted Socialist lawmakers to propose a bill that would have banned the use, sale or manufacture of asbestos. The bill also called for surveys on its impact on health.

However, lobbying by the Japan Asbestos Association, a domestic asbestos industry group, which said the dangers of asbestos had been exaggerated, led to enough opposition by lawmakers that the proposed bill was abandoned without being discussed even once, the Mainichi said.

The association also said that alternatives to asbestos, long used as a fire retardant, would be expensive and that their safety had not been adequately verified, the paper added.

Officials at the Japan Asbestos Association were not available for comment, but one was quoted by the Mainichi as saying: "The association at that time probably believed that asbestos was safe if laws and government directives were obeyed.

"This is different from both the present social situation and the thinking of the association."

Media have been filled with revelations of asbestos-related deaths and warnings of more to come in the two weeks since farm equipment maker Kubota Corp. said 79 former employees may have died of such illnesses over several decades.

Health Ministry data show that nearly 900 people died from mesothelioma, a lethal cancer of the chest and abdominal cavities caused mainly by asbestos exposure, in 2003 alone.

Kubota's disclosure of its employees' deaths as well as the fact three residents living near a now-closed plant were ill prompted other firms to report asbestos-linked deaths among their employees and, in some cases, the workers' family members.

Experts warn the public is also at risk from millions of older buildings, including schools, where asbestos was used extensively in construction in a country where fire prevention has long been a priority because of its densely populated cities.

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