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Murray's asbestos bill advances

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WASHINGTON -- The message from Sen. Patty Murray's office Tuesday was direct and dramatic: Soon, it will be safe to breathe again.

That clearly was the implication as Murray celebrated a major step forward for her bill to ban cancer-causing asbestos from commonly sold products.

The bill, which had been sidetracked for five years by Republicans, surged through the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, by a 19-0 vote.

"I'm thrilled that the entire committee has sent a clear and loud message of support, giving us strong momentum heading to the Senate floor," Murray said. "To the families who have been waiting for help, to the workers who need to be protected, I'd say we're almost there."

Among other things, Murray's bill calls for a complete ban of asbestos in products within two years after the measure becomes law. In a concession to Republicans, the bill would give the chlorine industry three years to phase out asbestos after new regulations are written by the Environmental Protection Agency.

The bill also would provide \$50 million in federal money for research into the causes and treatment of asbestos-related cancers. And it would require the federal government to conduct a more aggressive campaign to educate the public about the risks of asbestos.

The bill will most likely move to the floor this fall for a final vote where it is expected to earn broad support. On Tuesday, the only contrary word came from Republican Sen. Arlen Specter.

His concern wasn't about Murray's bill itself but about the broader -- and far more complex and politically volatile -- question of dealing with thousands of lawsuits from people killed and sickened by asbestos.

"An asbestos ban does not solve the problem that has been plaguing our courts for years, forcing many employers into bankruptcy and leaving thousands of workers without compensation," Specter said.

Murray said she would work with Specter, but only to a point.

"My bill is moving forward quickly with strong bipartisan support, and we shouldn't jeopardize this historic opportunity to finally protect American workers and their families from deadly asbestos," she said.

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