

Effort Announced to Mediate Asbestos Bill

Fri August 15, 2003 06:53 PM ET

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Pennsylvania Republican Sen. Arlen Specter announced on Friday an effort to mediate disagreements remaining over the establishment of a national asbestos compensation fund.

Specter said he and federal appeals court judge Edward Becker would meet next week in Philadelphia with representatives of labor, industry, insurance companies and the trial lawyer community.

Legislation establishing a fund of up to \$153 billion to compensate victims of asbestos, and take claims out of the courts, was narrowly approved by the Senate Judiciary Committee last month.

The full Senate is expected to take up the bill later this year but its passage is uncertain.

With the support of some Republican senators who backed the bill in committee, insurers have complained they are being asked to pay more than their fair share of the fund.

Organized labor thinks the compensation amounts under the bill will short-change those with cancer and other asbestos-linked ailments while letting industry off lightly compared with liabilities they would face from litigation.

Specter said in a statement that the talks would be held Aug. 18-19 at the U.S. Courthouse in Philadelphia. "If necessary, Judge Becker has reserved the balance of the week to continue the discussion," the statement 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.

Lawsuits over the mineral have driven 67 companies into bankruptcy.