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By Rebecca Davis O'Brien

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Jeff Rose, a 55-year-old grandfather in Georgetown, Ky., contracted a lethal lung disease doing a job he loves: carving kitchen countertops from slabs of quartz, a man-made product that has surged in popularity as an alternative to marble and granite.

Mr. Rose's 30-year-old son, Skyler, followed his father into the stone-fabrication business and, like him, inhaled the tiny particles of silica that are released when quartz is cut. He contracted silicosis, too.

"It really hurts knowing I'm sick like this," said Mr. Rose, who used to chop down the family Christmas tree but now loses his breath climbing a flight of stairs. "I love being creative with my hands. I'm not able to do that anymore."

The Roses are among hundreds of stone-fabrication workers who have been diagnosed with silicosis, a disease long associated with industrial toil that is afflicting more of the workers who help build American kitchens. The industry, confronting mounting litigation, is seeking legal immunity from Congress.

Representatives for manufacturers and distributors — many of them small businesses — say fabricated quartz, also known as engineered stone, is safe, and blame fabrication workshops further down the chain of production, where the slabs are cut to spec with improper equipment or precautions, for the surge in silicosis cases.

"The problem is the process, not the product," said Rebecca Shult, the chief legal officer at Cambria, the largest engineered stone manufacturer in the United States, in testimony before a House subcommittee in January. Republican lawmakers

expressed concern that the litigation might gut a $30 billion industry or drive business overseas.

The hearing concerned a bill that would put quartz in the same category as vaccines and firearms, products whose manufacturers are shielded by federal law from injury lawsuits. A similar push has sought to shield companies, including Bayer, from liability over health claims related to Roundup, a weedkiller used on crops.

The workers who cut the slabs, along with their lawyers, doctors and occupational health experts, said there was no safe way to cut quartz, which they describe as extremely toxic. They said the lawsuits would pay for victims' medical care and reform the industry.

"This is something that I'm afraid is really going to get out of control quickly," Mr. Rose said.

Made Stone

Engineered stone is sold widely as "quartz," a commercially appealing name that reflects its primary component: finely crushed quartz, an abundant mineral made of silicon and oxygen. Resins and pigments are added before the product is treated at high heat and formed into large rectangular slabs.

Most quartz slabs sold in the United States come from manufacturers in countries including China, Israel and Spain. They reach American homes from a network of big-box stores and smaller distributors, passing through fabrication shops where they are cut for sinks, corners and faucets.

When engineered stone is cut, it lets off tiny particles of silica. The dust lodges in the lungs, where the body identifies it as foreign and mounts an aggressive immune response. Over time, scar tissue forms and spreads, slowly killing the lung.

When Wade Hanicker started cutting stone countertops in Tampa, Fla., 15 years ago, many of the local shops were family businesses in people's backyards.

The work earned Mr. Hanicker a stable living, and he was good at it. "You're sculpting countertops, you're putting shapes on them, arches, curves," said Mr. Hanicker, 39. "To me it felt more like artwork."

He said those early shops were pretty dusty. They often "cut dry," he said, without soaking the slab with running water to tamp down dust.

Industry leaders say wet processing is critical to mitigate airborne dust. California in 2024 made it illegal to cut quartz dry.

Workers and doctors said wet processing is insufficient because the resulting wastewater eventually dries into dust. Other protective measures, including robotic cutting, ventilation and protective gear, are too expensive for many shops, they said.

Wade Hanicker started cutting stone countertops in Tampa, Fla., 15 years ago. Zack Wittman for The New York Times

Mr. Hanicker said his first safety concerns were about the blades and the heavy slabs. He sometimes wore an N-95 mask to inhale less dust. He could tell when he was cutting quartz, rather than marble or granite, because of the smell: It reminded him of burning plastic or rotten eggs.

Nobody talked about the risk of silicosis.

“Never once did I think that the dust that we were creating was going to do this type of harm to me,” he said.

Around 2022, Mr. Hanicker experienced back pain, which he treated with large doses of ibuprofen. Soon, the pain crept around to his chest. Months of doctors visits later, he was diagnosed with silicosis. He has experienced autoimmune disease, hip failure and loss of strength since his diagnosis; he is not on a list for a lung transplant, but the disease is progressing.

He still works in the industry, but can no longer do the heavy manual labor. Last year, he filed a lawsuit against about two dozen entities, including distributors and manufacturers. He also sued Cambria.

“What hurts me the most is, the things that a dad expects to do with their kids, being able to play with them — that’s being robbed from me,” said Mr. Hanicker, who has two young children.

Cases Mount

Dr. Jane C. Fazio, a pulmonologist at Olive View-U.C.L.A. Medical Center, saw her first case of silicosis in 2021: a man in his 60s who needed a lung transplant. Other patients soon arrived in the emergency room — middle-aged working men, mostly undocumented immigrants. She asked about their work.

“Everyone had the same answer,” she said. “They work in countertops.”

California has confirmed 512 silicosis cases from engineered stone and 29 deaths since 2019, according to the state’s public health department.

Dr. Fazio has visited fabrication workshops in the neighborhoods around the hospital, where she has observed varying levels of protection — and sometimes none at all — on “people covered in white powder.”

It takes years of exposure to contract silicosis, and even longer before symptoms appear. This, doctors say, is why silicosis among fabricators didn't really emerge until about five years ago, more than a decade after manufactured stone hit the market. They expect cases to rise.

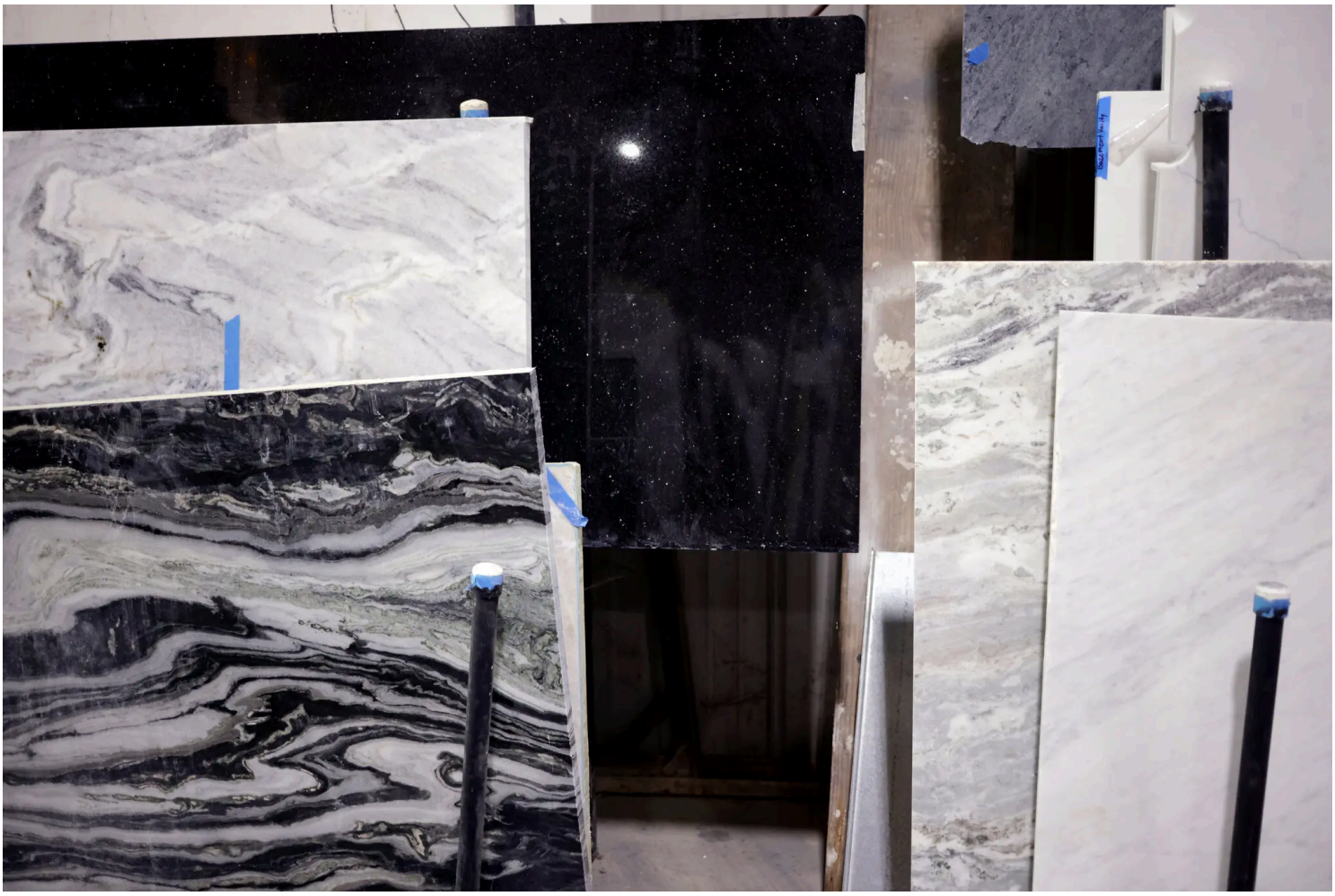
"It's extremely debilitating when it progresses," Dr. Fazio said. "It always progresses. And there is no real treatment."

In 2022, Dr. Fazio diagnosed a 48-year-old undocumented man from El Salvador with silicosis. After 15 years cutting slabs, he arrived at the hospital in such pain that he couldn't work. In an interview, the man said he had always worn a mask and cut with water.

"Nobody told us that this dust would cause silicosis," he said, requesting anonymity because of his immigration status.

In February 2025, he received a double lung transplant. But even this is a short-term fix. In a matter of years, lung transplant patients often slowly develop chronic organ rejection or other complications.

Legal Challenges



Tiny particles of silica are released when the stone is cut. Luke Sharrett for The New York Times

As cases mounted, lawsuits followed.

In 2024, a jury in Los Angeles awarded $52.4 million to a former stone fabricator in a lawsuit brought against manufacturers and distributors of engineered stone, including Cambria.

Cambria, a family-owned company in Minnesota, has fought the litigation. Cambria said employees at its shops had cut “over 650,000 Cambria slabs without a single reported case of silicosis.” The company said it had been targeted in lawsuits “over workplace practices entirely outside our control.”

Cambria has taken its fight to Washington, where last year it spent $250,000 on lobbyists. In September, Representatives Tom McClintock of California and Andy Biggs of Arizona, both Republicans, introduced a bill that would bar lawsuits against manufacturers or sellers of engineered stone for injuries that resulted from cutting the product in third-party facilities.

The bill places the burden for assuring safety on fabrication shops and workplace regulators.

In January, at a House subcommittee hearing on the bill, Representative Darrell Issa of California, the Republican chairman of the subcommittee, called the plaintiffs opportunistic and their lawsuits abusive.

Democrats on the committee noted that Marty Davis, Cambria's chief executive, was a big donor to President Trump. Members of the Davis family gave more than $340,000 to committees supporting Mr. Trump in the 2024 election, campaign finance records show.

Mr. Davis also supported Mr. Trump's 2020 bid, and encouraged him to fight the election results. He also gave Trump Media & Technology Group a $5 million loan through a limited liability company, so the fledgling social media company could stay afloat before going public, The New York Times reported in 2024.

In her testimony, Ms. Shult, Cambria's top lawyer, cast the blame for the silicosis outbreak on the fabrication shops in California.

Gary Talwar, the vice president of a family-owned stone distributor in Anaheim, told lawmakers that he was facing higher insurance premiums and mounting litigation costs, with 65 pending lawsuits.

Dr. David Michaels, an epidemiologist and professor at George Washington University's school of public health who ran the Occupational Safety and Health Administration from 2009 to 2017, also testified at the hearing.

During his tenure, OSHA updated standards for silica dust exposure. They may already be outdated, he told Congress, and it is not enough to protect workers from the dust given off by cutting engineered stone. He suggested that the industry look for safer substitutes, such as slabs made from recycled glass.

Mr. Rose said wryly that he was “caught between a rock and a hard place.” He is sick, and wants the industry to improve the safety of its product. But as the part owner of his company, he worries about the repercussions of the litigation.

“What I’m aiming for is to be a leader in this industry, to do things right,” he said.

Rebecca Davis O’Brien covers labor and the work force for The Times.