

Implementation of a dedicated state-wide asbestos unit within Workplace Health and Safety Queensland

Link to the National Strategic Plan:

Strategy:
Best practice

Deliverable:
Identify opportunities to share best practice for initiatives related to the safe management of asbestos such as licensing, education, training and home renovations where ACMs may be present

Outcome:
Evidence-based best practice to minimise risks in targeted areas

Location:
Queensland, statewide

Introduction

In 2010, Workplace Health and Safety Queensland (WHSQ) established a dedicated Asbestos Unit that was staffed with three asbestos technical experts. In 2017, staff levels in the unit were increased by five staff in order to, amongst other things, target investigation of poorly performing asbestos licence holders, to target selected asbestos regulatory prosecutions, to oversee high profile and high risk events such as the removal of asbestos debris arising from the use of high pressure water and to oversee the management and removal of imported asbestos containing materials. To ensure interventions by the unit are based upon rigorous occupational principles, the unit is led by the Chief Advisor Asbestos and Occupational Hygiene who has completed a PhD in the area of dusts, fibres and particles. The unit employs inspectors with technical expertise regarding asbestos and compliance processes.

Action taken

The following are the key priorities of the Asbestos Unit:

1. Assessment of work practices of current asbestos removal licence holders

The unit is undertaking a review of the compliance history of all Queensland licensed asbestos removalists.

2. Rapid response following importation of materials containing asbestos

Imported materials containing asbestos continue to find their way into the Australian and Queensland supply chain. The Australian Government is reviewing border protection mechanisms to prevent such imports. In the interim, WHSQ is notified of imports of materials containing asbestos via the Heads of Workplace Safety Authorities (HWSA) Asbestos Importation Working Group. Such notification triggers the national Rapid Response Protocol and the operational aspects of this, such as assessment of the material and statutory direction in relation to risk management and removal. The unit coordinates these responses.

3. Target high-risk asbestos related regulatory offences

To ensure that high-risk events associated with non-licensed asbestos work are comprehensively investigated and considered for either regulatory infringement or prosecution, the Principal Inspectors from the unit utilise a 'mobile' team approach. This involves a comprehensive investigation of high-risk events, including: where licensed quantities of asbestos were removed without the required licence; a building or structure was demolished without first removing asbestos; high-pressure water was used on asbestos containing material; and asbestos related waste has not been disposed of appropriately.

4. Rapid intervention regarding high profile and risk events such as asbestos debris caused by high-pressure water

Each year in Queensland, there are approximately five events involving the use of high-pressure water to clean an asbestos roof occur, causing a high risk of exposure to the resultant asbestos debris. To ensure appropriately skilled and time-resourced staff are mobilised, staff from the unit carry out the oversight of the clean-up of asbestos debris caused by use of high-pressure water.

Results and outcomes

A review of the compliance history of all Queensland licensed asbestos removalists has identified a number of licence holders who consistently demonstrate poor asbestos removal practices. These licence holders have been escalated for comprehensive audit by the unit. The comprehensive audit may recommend that operators need to 'show cause' as to why the licence should not be conditioned, suspended or cancelled.

The involvement of the unit in the HWSA Asbestos Importation Working Group has been working effectively. Information regarding imported asbestos containing materials has been shared between jurisdictions following the activation of the Rapid Response Protocol.

The initiatives and priorities of the dedicated unit are regularly reviewed and assessed to ensure they are effective and appropriately managing asbestos issues across Queensland.

Next steps

The expansion of the dedicated unit within WHSQ has only recently occurred. The resourcing and work of the Asbestos Unit will be regularly assessed and reviewed to ensure it is meeting its objectives.