



# Managing the risk of asbestos at the border

The health risks posed by exposure to asbestos are well known. An Australia-wide ban on the manufacture and use of all forms of asbestos took effect on 31 December 2003. Work Health and Safety (WHS) laws in all states and territories prohibit the supply and unauthorised transport, use, or handling of asbestos.

In order to support the domestic ban:

- Importing asbestos, or goods containing asbestos, to Australia is prohibited under Regulation 4C of the *Customs (Prohibited Imports) Regulations 1956* unless a permission has been granted or a lawful exception applies.
- Exporting asbestos, or certain goods containing asbestos, from Australia is prohibited under Regulation 4 and Schedule 1 of the *Customs (Prohibited Exports) Regulations 1958*, unless permission has been granted or a lawful exception applies.

Australia is one of the few countries in the Asia/Pacific region that has a comprehensive ban on all six types of asbestos. In many countries, despite the known threat to human health, local standards allow low levels or particular types of asbestos to be used for manufacturing. Goods manufactured outside Australia might be labelled “asbestos free” and still contain low levels of asbestos. Such goods will not be permitted for importation into Australia, except in very limited circumstances.

## Types of prohibited asbestos

*Asbestos* means the asbestiform varieties of mineral silicates belonging to the following serpentine or amphibole groups of rock forming minerals:

- actinolite asbestos;
- grunerite (or amosite) asbestos (brown);
- anthophyllite asbestos;
- chrysotile asbestos (white);
- crocidolite asbestos (blue);
- tremolite asbestos; or
- a mixture that contains one or more of the minerals referred above.

All forms of asbestos are highly toxic and carcinogenic to humans. Exposure to asbestos can cause cancer of the lung, larynx and ovary mesothelioma (a cancer of the pleural and peritoneal linings) and asbestosis (fibrosis of the lungs).

## Australian border controls

The Australian Border Force (ABF) targets both imported and exported goods considered to be at risk of containing asbestos. A list of at-risk goods is available from the [ABF website](#). Any unauthorised goods found to contain asbestos will be seized and the importer may face penalties and/or prosecution.

## Ensuring the goods do not contain asbestos

It is the responsibility of importers and exporters to ensure they do not import or export prohibited goods such as asbestos. Should the ABF suspect goods arriving at the border contain asbestos, the goods will be held and examined.

The risk of goods containing asbestos increases when they are sourced from countries that have asbestos producing industries. Goods said to contain no asbestos, which are manufactured in the same factory that produce asbestos containing goods are considered particularly at risk due to possible cross contamination.

Importers should not assume goods labelled “asbestos free” contain no asbestos or that testing of goods undertaken overseas certified “asbestos free” meet our border requirements. Some countries can lawfully label or test goods declaring them asbestos free if they are below a certain threshold.

To ensure that goods which are manufactured overseas do not contain asbestos, importers should confirm that there was no use of asbestos, or contaminated materials, at any point in the supply chain. Importers should investigate, and where appropriate implement:

- Contractual obligations with their suppliers specifying nil asbestos content;
- Testing for asbestos content prior to shipping the goods to Australia;
- Regular risk assessment and quality assurance processes, that take into account:
  - what raw materials are used in the manufacture of the goods;
  - where overseas manufacturers source their raw materials; and
  - the identification and eradication of asbestos-risk activities at the point of manufacture.

The importer may be required to arrange sampling and testing while the goods are at the border, to provide assurance to the ABF that the asbestos content is nil. The arrangement and cost of any independent inspection, testing and storage of the goods is the responsibility of the importer/exporter in Australia in line with Section 186 of the *Customs Act 1901* (the Customs Act).

## Due Diligence

Importers and customs brokers must be aware of Australia’s asbestos import prohibition. Before goods are imported to Australia, importers must have adequate assurance that their goods, if at risk, do not contain asbestos. This can be achieved by engaging with their overseas suppliers early to gain documented assurance. Importers must not assume that goods contain no asbestos.

The ABF expects importers to be able to demonstrate that they have undertaken adequate risk assessment measures for their goods that are known to be at risk of containing asbestos, or are supplied from countries with asbestos producing industries.

The nature and level of information within the supporting documentation may provide adequate assurance depending on the risk of the goods containing asbestos. Several types of documentation may be necessary to demonstrate a sufficient level of assurance. A non-exhaustive list of examples of supporting documentation is provided below:

- Declarations which state that the goods have nil asbestos content (supported by evidence);
- Documentation outlining the level of assurances taken throughout the supply chain;
- Invoices demonstrating the supplier of the goods;
- Information about the supply chain and possible quality assurance processes in place;
- Illustrative Descriptive Material;
- Ingredient lists;
- Test certificate or laboratory report;
- Material Safety Data sheets.

Solely relying on a declaration that states the goods have nil asbestos content from an importer and/or supplier may not provide adequate assurance. When a customs broker receives a declaration from an importer stating the goods have nil asbestos content, the customs broker should ensure they have an understanding of what assurances/supporting evidence the importer is able to provide to support the declaration, if requested by the ABF.

Identified risks of asbestos in a supply chain should be mitigated by testing of the goods through an accredited laboratory, prior to shipment to Australia. A laboratory certificate showing test results to Australian requirements, should be obtained. This may assist in expediting border clearance.

## Testing for asbestos

When goods are tested for asbestos content, testing certification (also called a laboratory testing report) must be provided to the ABF. Goods being imported can be tested prior to the importation by a laboratory located in Australia or overseas.

Importers, who wish to have their goods tested in Australia, prior to the importation, must first obtain permission from the Minister responsible for administering the *Work, Health and Safety Act 2011* (Cth), currently the Minister for Industrial Relations (the Minister), or an authorised person, to import samples for the purposes of analysis.

The Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency (ASEA) is responsible for administering the import and export permission process for the Minister. To apply for import permission, applications should address the criteria located on the ASEA website and be made in writing to the Minister. More information, including the Minister's contact details for permission applications, is located at the [ASEA website](#).

The act of applying for import permission is **not a guarantee** that it will be granted. Owners must not ship their goods until they have received the import permission in writing. A copy of the permission must be produced to the ABF if requested to do so.

Samples being imported for testing in Australia must be from the actual shipment to be imported. Testing in Australia must be undertaken by a laboratory that is accredited by the National Association of Testing Authorities (NATA). Details of NATA accredited laboratories are available at the [NATA website](#).

When the testing is carried out overseas, prior to shipping to Australia, the certification must be from an overseas testing laboratory accredited by the NATA equivalent testing authority in that overseas economy. The local testing authority must be a signatory to a Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA) with NATA. The testing report must contain adequate information to be able to demonstrate assurance at the border. This includes:

- the test method used;
- the date and origin of the sample;
- description of the sample (and sub-sample if applicable) including weight, size and colour;
- whether fibres are detected under Polarised Light Microscopy / Dispersion Staining method (PLM/DS) at the detection limit, and if so what type of fibre;
- if mineral fibres of an unknown type are identified, the confirming technique used to assess asbestos content; and
- the name of the analyst.

Where a laboratory outside Australia is engaged, it must be made clear that any level of asbestos detected is noted in the report. If the ABF suspects that imported goods contain asbestos, these goods will be held at the border for further testing. In Australia, the ABF requires testing by a NATA accredited laboratory to certify that the goods do not contain asbestos.

For further information on testing for asbestos, NATA has produced two industry user guides. Both are available on their website:

- **Industry User Guide 7** - Working with NATA Accredited Asbestos Facilities.
- **Industry User Guide 7.1** - Working with NATA Accredited Asbestos Facilities for Import/Export.

Information on international accredited authorities and their MRA status can be found at the following organisation websites who NATA are a signatory of:

- The Asia Pacific Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation (APLAC) MRA, a regional arrangement with participation by upwards of 20 economies including all of Australia's major trading partners in the Asia Pacific region: [www.aplac.org](http://www.aplac.org).
- The International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation (ILAC) MRA, a global arrangement covering all regions: [www.ilac.org](http://www.ilac.org).

Customs Brokers and Freight Forwarders have a due diligence to ensure that a laboratory test report provided by the importer lists the correct test, is for the client's goods which they are facilitating, and is genuine. Irregularities need to be queried with the importer before passing on documents to the ABF.

## If asbestos is detected at the border

If asbestos, or goods containing asbestos are detected, the goods are seized as prohibited imports and will be forfeited to the Crown. If unauthorised asbestos is found to have entered Australia, the importer of the goods may be subject to penalties and/or prosecution for offences against the Customs Act, in addition to other available offences under state or territory law.

Shipments from overseas suppliers who have been identified as sending goods containing asbestos to Australia will be targeted for intervention at the border. Goods that have previously been imported from these suppliers will also be identified and referred to state and territory work health and safety regulators for further investigation. As a member of the World Customs Organization, the ABF takes part in the exchange of information and intelligence with other customs administrations regarding the movement of various controlled goods worldwide.

## Penalties

In accordance with the Customs Act, asbestos border offences can attract fines for individuals up to \$222,000 or three times the value of the goods, whichever is the greater, and/or imprisonment for up to five years. For a body corporate the same border offence attracts a higher penalty of up to \$1,110,000 or fifteen times the value of the goods, whichever is the greater, in accordance with the *Crimes Act 1914* (Cth).

## Further information

For further information regarding Australian's asbestos border control, visit the ABF website: [www.abf.gov.au/asbestos](http://www.abf.gov.au/asbestos).