

## **Submission to National Dust Disease Taskforce**

### **Phase 2 Consultation**

**By Smartstone Australia Pty Ltd**

#### **Background**

As a reputable supplier of engineered stone into the Australian market for almost 20 years, we strongly believe that the recent cluster of silicosis cases, mostly in South East Queensland, are the result of a small number of stonemason businesses that have been run by directors with little regard for the health and safety of their employees.

Combining the above with no oversight or supervision of the industry by state government regulators led to the situation we now find ourselves in.

Many hundreds of professionally managed stonemason businesses exist in Australia, and their track record of safe working environments and no cases of silicosis amongst their staff are proof that the product can be safely fabricated and processed.

It is our firm view that state governments should implement a licensing scheme for stonemasons and their workers. This would assist to further improve industry practices, workplace health and safety, as well as allow for better monitoring of the industry.

We welcome the opportunity to meet with any members of the taskforce to discuss our submission, or other relevant industry matters at any time.

We make this submission as a starting point for further engagement and look forward to hearing from you. I can be contacted on 0438 221 028 with any questions about the enclosed submission, or to organise to meet.

#### **Regulatory and Governance**

1. Man-made stone that contains quartz including porcelain slabs, concrete slabs, and quartz slabs.
2. Wet cutting and processing, along with air monitoring in all stone processing factories should be mandated by all state and territory governments. This act will go a long way to reducing the risk of silicosis in the industry.

A state-based licensing scheme to accredit stonemason businesses should also be implemented immediately. This will codify best industry practice along the above lines and enforce required standards in the sector.

3. It is only in recent years, since the Queensland cluster emerged that State Government workplace regulators have taken much notice of this growing industry. State and territory governments need to be consistently in touch with all stonemason businesses, and implementing a licensing scheme to ensure safe workplaces for all employees will affect this need. A licensing scheme will not only improve industry practice, but also allow for better

monitoring of the industry as a whole by work, health and safety regulators.

4. We do not believe that a ban on the importation or processing of engineered stone to be a proportionate or practical response. Silica is found in 80% of building products and state and territory regulators must increase their enforcement of safe working environments in stonemason factories.

Many stonemasons have for a long time worked safely, with no workers acquiring dust diseases due to them being professionally and safely run businesses. This shows that it can be achieved, and the whole industry should not be shut down due to a small number of rogue operators who flourished due to poor state government oversight of the industry.

5. We strongly recommend option C – fabrication and installation under licence. Many other trades are licenced and regulated and stonemasons should be no different.

Whilst a nationally coordinated accreditation scheme would be ideal, a state-based scheme is probably a quicker, and more likely outcome.

The issues being faced here by stonemasons are similar in many ways to those faced by MDF processing businesses 30 years ago who had to adapt and adopt safer work practices to ensure the ongoing viability of their industry.

6. What can be learned here is that state government regulators should not ignore emerging industries, and there are possibly other industries that should have further oversight than they currently receive.

### **Workforce Organisational Culture**

7. We strongly believe licensing of stonemasons would assist in this regard. An unlicensed stonemason would not be able to obtain work from builders, or slabs from suppliers. This should be backed by a robust enforcement regime that ensures regulations are enforced by the industry.

Education campaigns in multiple languages would also assist business owners from non-English speaking backgrounds to understand their responsibilities.

8. As stressed in previous answers, ongoing state government education and enforcement.
9. As a stone supplier, this is not an area of our expertise or knowledge.
10. Workplace monitoring such as that proposed to gain accreditation by Australian Engineered Stone Advisory Group (AESAG). We would be happy to provide a full copy of this process under separate cover.

## **Resourcing and Capability**

11. Educational resources need to be translated into languages other than English. The workforce is culturally and linguistically diverse and appropriate support should be given to these individuals to better understand their rights and industry best practice. At a minimum, safety materials should be translated into Arabic, Mandarin, Greek and Vietnamese to support these individuals.

State and territory regulators should also build help desk functions so businesses, workers and the wider industry can more easily seek information about health and safety requirements.

12. This is not an area of our expertise or knowledge.

## **Research and Development**

13. State and territory government licensing of stonemasons will help ensure workers have appropriate competencies. Qualifications could also be gained through an appropriate TAFE course.

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16. High Pressure Laminate commonly known as 'Laminex' is a close, but imperfect substitute. If the import of engineered stone is banned, almost every stonemason in Australia will go out of business. Whilst there is much R&D going on around the world, to date nothing has been developed that can commercially substitute in the required quantities for engineered stone at this time. Further, it should be recognised that Australian customers continue to see great value in engineered stone and purchase the product in high volumes for use as benchtops.

17. As a stone supplier, this is not an area of our expertise or knowledge.



Bruce Rayment

Chief Executive Officer

16<sup>th</sup> November 2020