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NEWS

California Fabricators Face Possible Artificial Stone Ban as Silicosis Cases Mount



By [Farida Jhabvala Romero](#) [X](#) Apr 14, 2026 Updated 12:00 pm PT [Save Article](#)



Javier Suarez polishes a countertop while wearing a powered air purifying respirator at Scolari Marble & Granite in Vallejo on March 31, 2026. California artificial stone fabricators face a potential ban as regulators weigh action amid rising silicosis cases, even as shops spend heavily on compliance that doctors say may not prevent the deadly lung disease. *(Martin do Nascimento/KQED)*

As artificial stone became the top countertop material in the U.S. over the last decade, fabricator Gino Scolari told KQED he's spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to protect his employees from **an incurable lung disease**

linked to the factory-made product.

Artificial stone, also known as quartz or engineered stone, now makes up most of the business at Scolari Marble and Granite, after overtaking natural stones in popularity. To keep workers from inhaling toxic silica dust generated when cutting quartz, Scolari invested in automated machines that slice stone slabs under a layer of water, sophisticated personal protective equipment, strict clean-up practices, silica air monitoring and other measures.

“I don’t think you can get any more stringent on our protocols right now,” said Scolari, 64, observing workers at his Vallejo facility polish quartz countertop edges while wearing powered-air purifying respirators. “We’re on the guys constantly. That is probably 80% of the fight is making sure the guys follow through with all their protection and standards and just following the protocols.”

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Even as companies invest heavily to comply with California’s strict silica rules, a looming regulatory decision could upend the industry.

California regulators are weighing whether to effectively ban the fabrication of artificial stone amid mounting evidence that even rigorous safety measures may not protect workers from silicosis, an aggressive and often fatal lung disease. The decision could reshape a multibillion-dollar industry while determining whether thousands of workers remain at risk.

As silicosis disables hundreds of stonecutters statewide, the Occupational Safety and Health Standards Board is considering a medical association’s **petition** to prohibit the fabrication of artificial stone containing more than 1% crystalline silica at its meeting on Thursday.



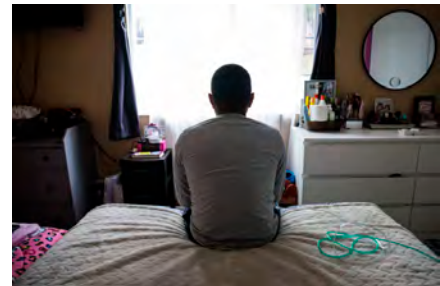
Carlos Orellana polishes a countertop at Scolari Marble & Granite in Vallejo on March 31, 2026. (Martin do

A final decision on whether to advance the proposal is expected next month **amid fierce industry opposition**. A yes vote would kickstart a rulemaking process, meaning it could be months or years before any ban is fully approved.

Opponents argue that the problem lies with unlicensed fabricators violating safety requirements, not the material itself. A major U.S. manufacturer and industry representatives are pushing instead to restrict quartz's supply to only certified fabrication businesses. But worker advocates say research now shows that crystalline silica particles released by artificial stone are more dangerous than previously known, and that even people at compliant shops risk contracting silicosis.

"The fabricators are in a very difficult position because they're dealing with what I would characterize as an inherently hazardous product. And yet this is what has evolved into the majority of their business," said David Harrington, a retired Cal/OSHA officer who worked with Scolari and other motivated fabrication business owners to help them comply with the silica regulations.

Artificial stone can contain more than 90% silica, which researchers deem uniquely toxic. Keeping exposures low enough at all times is extremely difficult, according to Harrington. Wet routers and saws may temporarily allow dust to become airborne, workers may not always wear the right respirators, and forklift drivers can carry silica residue in their tracks to unsuspecting workers.



➔ **California Doctors Urge Ban on Engineered Stone as Silicosis Cases Surge**

Implementing the current Cal/OSHA rules, which require the wet cutting of artificial stone to limit dust exposure and other steps, significantly reduces airborne silica particles, according to Harrington. But even if all operations complied, it wouldn't be enough to prevent some stoneworkers from being overexposed to the hazard, he said.

"Maybe you slow down the rate of disease, but you're still going to have people working in this industry who are going to develop silicosis," said Harrington, who spoke before regulators in support of a ban in February.

California, the only state **actively tracking** silicosis cases in the industry, confirmed more than 540 stoneworkers have contracted the incurable disease since 2019, most of them Latino immigrants. Dozens have undergone lung transplants, and 29 died. Some of the sick workers, who now need oxygen machines to breathe, are only **in their 20s**.

Cases have also been reported in Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, Utah **and other states**.



Carlos Orellana wears a monitor that measures his silica exposure while working polishing countertops at Scolari Marble & Granite in Vallejo on March 31, 2026. (Martin do Nascimento/KQED)

Occupational doctors proposing that California prohibit the fabrication of artificial stone believe it would encourage consumers and builders to use safer substitutes. Some quartz manufacturers have started selling products with low or no crystalline silica in the U.S. and Australia, the first country to ban high-silica artificial stone in 2024.

For Scolari, phasing out the dominant material in the countertop industry would be a “huge shock,” but fabricators like himself would simply adapt, he said. He agrees that reducing the level of toxic silica in all quartz countertop products would help.

“If one company can do it, make a zero silica content quartz or whatever they’re gonna call it, then yeah, I think they should all go to that. Why not? It just makes sense,” said Scolari, who has worked in the slab fabrication business for about 40 years, when customers preferred granite and marble, which are generally considered safer.



Gino Scolari at Scolari Marble & Granite in Vallejo on March 31, 2026. (Martin do Nascimento/KQED)

As things stand now, Cal/OSHA inspectors say they don’t have the capacity

to visit roughly **1,300 fabrication operations** statewide, but evidence suggests many shops are not following the rules. Out of the more than 130 shops the division has inspected, 94% had violations, according to Eric Berg, a top Cal/OSHA official.

Unlicensed fabricators have a financial incentive to work on artificial stone without purchasing tools to implement the required protections, Scolari said. People can earn \$2,000 or more per day while cutting slabs dry, in front of someone's house or backyard, he said.

“That’s a lot of money. It’s very tempting. So I think the only thing that I think we could do industry-wide ... controlling access to it. Or just banning it outright. Just get rid of it,” said Scolari, adding that workers’ compensation insurance costs have increased due to the silicosis crisis. “Personally, I think regulating it is the correct way. But if you’re gonna ban it, then let’s ban it and move on.”



Signs warn of the risk of silica dust exposure at Scolari Marble & Granite in Vallejo on March 31, 2026. (Martin do Nascimento/KQED)

Silicosis, an ancient occupational disease among miners and stonemasons, resurfaced in an accelerated form in the U.S., coinciding with the explosion in popularity of artificial stone. Quartz, which is stain-resistant and cheaper than natural stones, can be produced in attractive designs and colors. Once installed, it’s safe for consumers.

But the combination of crystalline silica powder with resins, dyes and other quartz ingredients is powerfully toxic, said Dr. Robert Blink, a former president of the Western Occupational and Environmental Medicine Association, which petitioned for the ban.

The silica particles generated during fabrication and installation processes are so tiny that they lodge deep into the lungs and cause progressive scarring. To handle artificial stone safely, workers would need to wear a Level A hazmat suit, or “spacesuit,” which is generally unworkable, he said.



Workers at Scolari Marble & Granite select a slab for cutting in Vallejo on March 31, 2026. (Martin do Nascimento/KQED)

“Humans really can’t work this material safely. You need a robot,” Blink told regulators at a recent meeting. “There may be problems with other materials, there always have been, but it’s nothing as dangerous as this.”

A vocal opponent of the petition is Cambria, the largest U.S. manufacturer of artificial stone. Other large quartz manufacturers facing hundreds of lawsuits by sick workers, like Israel-based Caesarstone or Cosentino, which is headquartered in Spain, have developed alternative products with lower or no crystalline silica. But Cambria has not.

The Minnesota-based company, which also runs its own fabrication shops, supports establishing an industry-led **certification program**. State Assemblymember Phillip Chen, who represents parts of Orange and San Bernardino counties, introduced **a bill** that would require Cal/OSHA to develop a certification process by Jan. 2028.

“We know compliant stone fabrication is happening in good shops. It’s possible. It’s feasible. Because we do it,” Rebecca Schult, chief legal counsel at Cambria, told regulators at a meeting last month. “There are no spacesuits, I assure you. There are real human workers, hundreds of them, working with us for over 20 years.”

In January, Schult testified at a congressional hearing in support of a **federal bill** that would immunize artificial stone manufacturers and suppliers from liability, by prohibiting civil lawsuits against stone slab manufacturers or sellers for harm resulting from the alteration of their products. The bill, by Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Calif., would also dismiss pending lawsuits.



➡ Stone Industry Proposes Self-Policing as California Weighs Artificial Stone Ban

At a recent event attended by a law firm representing about 400 stonecutters claiming silica-related injuries in California and 15 other states, a former large-scale fabricator doubted a certification program would stop the rise of silicosis in the industry.

Aki Vourakis, who ran one of the largest stone fabrication companies in the U.S., said Aegean Stoneworks was repeatedly recognized by major quartz manufacturers and suppliers, yet at least eight of his workers developed silicosis. One died in 2025, he said.

“When I tell you that even one of the best-run, best-capitalized, award-winning shop in the country cannot keep its workers safe, you should understand what that means for the thousands of smaller, less sophisticated operations across the country,” said Vourakis, now a **consultant to attorneys** specializing in silica exposure and engineered stone fabrication and installation.

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