OSHA Delays Start of Silica Exposure Rule Enforcement

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WASHINGTON (PAI) — Citing the need for better education of construction firms and workers about how to battle exposure to cancer-causing crystalline silica dust, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) delayed the start of enforcement of its new silica exposure rule by three months.

In its April 6 statement, the agency said it needs "to conduct additional outreach and provide educational materials and guidance for employers" because of "the unique nature of the requirements in the construction standard."

So enforcement will start on Sept. 23, 2017, not June 23, the agency said. OSHA’s new standard would cut worker exposure to silica, now 100 micrograms per cubic meter of air, averaged over an 8-hour shift, to 50 micrograms/cubic meter. Workers who inhale the dust can develop silicosis or lung cancer.

The delay upset the AFL-CIO which, like the building trades, has lobbied for years to curb worker exposure to silica dust.

"The labor movement has fought for decades to win this lifesaving rule, and any further delay is unacceptable. The longer the Trump administration delays, the more workers will suffer and die. This action alone will lead to an additional 160 worker deaths. We will do everything possible to make sure this commonsense rule is not taken away. Workers’ lives are at stake," Federation President Richard Trumka said.

OSHA did not say what it would do about the enforcement start for silica exposure for other industries, in 2018. And the delay doesn’t mean OSHA will walk away from cutting construction worker exposure to silica dust.

"OSHA expects employers in the construction industry to continue to take steps either to come into compliance with the new permissible exposure limit or to implement specific dust controls for certain operations as provided in Table 1 of the standard," it said. "Construction employers should also continue to prepare to implement the standard's other requirements, including exposure assessment, medical surveillance, and employee training."
How does dust hurt you?

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease

COPD, also called Chronic Obstructive Airways Disease (COAD), a blanket term for obstructive lung conditions like bronchitis and emphysema. Reduces airflow out of the lungs. HSE estimates 15-20 per cent could be work-related.

Asthma

Another obstructive lung disease, linked to exposure to irritants or allergens (‘sensitivities’) at work. A reversible shortness of breath, between 15 and 20 per cent of all cases are work-related.

Extrinsic allergic alveolitis (EAA)

An allergic condition which affects workers exposed to biological dusts, causing conditions including farmer’s lung and pigeon fancier’s lung.

Fibrosing alveolitis

Also known as pulmonary fibrosis, can be caused by some occupational dust exposures, for example work with cobalt or ‘hard metals’ in cutting tools.

Related conditions for example ‘flock workers’ lung’ and ‘popcorn lung’ (Hazards 104), have been discovered recently.

Pneumoconiosis

A group of restrictive lung diseases like silicosis, talcosis and asbestosis, where dust exposure causes debilitating lung scarring.

Cancers

Tumours, particularly of the lung and nose, are related to substances commonly encountered at work including asbestos, silica, chrome VI, nickel, cadmium and wood dust. These account for thousands of work-related deaths each year.

Heart disease

Dust-affected lungs put extra strain on the heart, which can lead to right-sided heart failure. Some occupational exposures, like hard metal dust, can cause potentially fatal conditions like cardiomyopathy. Very fine dust particles cause inflammation of the heart and a higher risk of heart attacks.

Other problems

Exposure levels half the level allowable for most workplace dusts overwhelm the body’s first line of defence, the ‘mucoiliary clearance’ that filters out dust in the upper respiratory tract. This can leave the worker more vulnerable to infections and more susceptible to occupational lung disease. Lots of other dust-related conditions occur, some specific to particular exposures. Beryllium is linked to sarcoidosis, chrome dust to chrome ulcers.