

New OSHA Silica Rule Could Save 700 Lives and prevent 1,600 Cases of Silicosis a Year

More than 2,000 workers died from silicosis, a chronic, disabling lung disease as a result of inhaling crystalline silica between 1999 and 2013 in the US, even as many deaths from silicosis are not diagnosed and under reported. Between 3000 and 7000 new cases of silicosis arise each year. Exposure to crystalline silica can also cause lung cancer and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease [COPD] and kidney disease.

An estimated 2 million workers are exposed in a broad range of workplaces, including construction, foundries, and glass manufacturing, brick-making facilities and at hydraulic fracking sites.

U.S. Labor Secretary Thomas Perez announced on March 24, 2016, a final implementation of a new rule, issued by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), which will sharply lower worker exposure to silica dust. The old OSHA standard dates back to 1971. In 1974, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health recommended that OSHA cut its silica exposure limit in half. The current round of rulemaking began under the Clinton administration – almost 20 years ago.

The new limit does reduces dust levels two to five times lower than the current OSHA permissible exposure and requires employers to use cost-effective measures to reduce silica dust, including wetting down and enclosing affected areas, vacuuming up dust before workers can inhale it, and improved ventilation. Employers must also monitor workers' exposure to silica, provide medical exams for those with high exposure, and train all potentially exposed workers about silica hazards and appropriate worksite controls. The rule itself

and segments of the rule will, however, be phased in over several years; and some industries like hydraulic fracking will have even longer extensions.

The new standard could save nearly 700 lives and prevent approximately 1,600 new cases of silicosis per year, according to OSHA. While unions and worker safety advocates such as the National Council for Occupational Safety and Health, the American Public Health Association and Public Citizen applaud the new rule industry and business groups have expressed opposition.