National COSH Backgrounder

Silica Kills
Don’t Let Special Interests Stop a New Safety Standard

Corporate lobbyists are working overtime to stop a long-delayed new federal standard on silica. It’s a widely-used material that poses serious health hazards to American workers. Nearby workers and the public can breathe it, too and “take home” dust can harm family members. Exposure to silica can cause cancer, silicosis and other life-threatening diseases; at least 700 lives could be saved each year with stricter limits on exposure.

But industry groups are making phony claims of high costs for business, while downplaying real health risks to workers. Their allies in Congress are attempting to block a new silica standard that has been in the works since 2009.

Budget committees in both the House and Senate have attached an amendment – called a “rider” –to this year’s proposed budget for the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). It would prevent the agency from issuing a new standard to better protect workers from silica dust without further “study”. ¹

But the hazards of exposure to silica dust have been studied for decades. It’s time to act. Here are the facts:

**Silica is common in many workplace dust exposures.** It is found in stone, rock, brick, and other building materials. More than 2 million workers are exposed to silica dust each year in construction, foundries, mining, shipbuilding and other industries.

¹ “Senate Appropriations Committee Passes Amendment Delaying Silica Rule,” Masonry Contractors Association of America, June 30 2015.
Crystalline silica is a human lung carcinogen and can also lead to kidney and respiratory diseases. Breathing in silica dust can cause silicosis, a lung disease that can severely disable affected workers.2

A worker with silicosis typically has trouble breathing, making it difficult to walk, climb steps or carry out other basic functions. The disease can be fatal; there is no cure or treatment currently available.

New rules are ready to go: The current standard limiting exposure to silica was issued in 1971 and is outdated. Stricter limits, based on rigorous scientific evidence, were first recommended by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) in 19743 – more than forty years ago!

In 2009, the incoming Obama Administration identified silica as a high-priority for new regulation. In 2011, OSHA submitted a draft standard to the Office of Management and Budget, which has responsibility for reviewing new federal rules. The process is supposed to take 90 days; instead, in the face of intense industry lobbying, it took nearly three years.4

After clearing the OMB hurdle, the proposed new standard was released in 2013 and OSHA held public hearings in 2014. The agency is now reviewing public comments and preparing to issue a final standard.

What does the new standard require?

• Reduced exposure to silica, with a uniform Permissible Exposure Level (PEL) – for all industries – of 50 micrograms of silica per cubic meter. This reduces allowable dust level from two to five times the current limit.
• Use of effective approaches to reduce exposure, including wet methods and ventilation.
• Ongoing monitoring of workers’ exposure to silica, and medical exams for those with high exposure.
• Training for workers about silica hazards and how to avoid them.

How can exposure to silica be reduced?

2 “Crystalline Silica Exposure Health Hazard Information,” U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration, 2002
3 Criteria for a Recommended Standard: Occupational Exposure to Crystalline Silica, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 1974
4 “Slow-motion tragedy for American workers,” Center for Public Integrity, June 29, 2015
Deadly silica dust can be reduced by commonly available – and cost-effective—dust control measures. These include wetting down work operations to reduce dust, and vacuuming to collect dust where it is created – before workers can inhale it.

The new standard will save 700 lives each year, OSHA projects, because reduced exposure to silica will decrease the incidence of cancers, kidney disease, silicosis and other life-threatening illnesses. Once the rule is fully implemented, OSHA projects 1,600 fewer cases of silicosis each year.

How much will it cost? About $1,242 per year for each covered workplace. Projected costs are lower – about $550 a year – for small businesses with less than 20 employees.

The new silica standard will save $2.8 to $4.7 billion over the next 60 years. As fewer workers become ill with silicosis and other diseases, employers will save money due to lower health care costs, less sick time and higher productivity.

What happens now? OSHA has publicly committed to issuing a new final standard on silica in 2016.5 But the agency will be unable to act if the amendments blocking a new rule, approved in committee, are enacted in to law.

What you can do:
Current spending authority for federal agencies expires on Dec. 11, 2015 and Congress must pass a new budget by that date. To protect workers from the hazards of deadly silica dust, please:

- **Contact your Senators and U.S. Representatives.** Tell them you insist on a clean federal budget, with no restrictions on OSHA or other federal agencies charged with protecting our health, safety and environment. [Insert online tool to contact Congress here? Or link to petition?]
- **Contact President Obama.** Let him know you support OSHA’s efforts to protect worker – and insist that he veto any budget proposal that blocks action on silica and other health, safety and environmental standards.
- **Sign up for the National COSH e-newsletter**, for updates on silica and other key workplace safety issues.

---

Workers Speak out on Silica

“I may not look sick to you, but I am sick. I have silicosis. I worked in a foundry for 16 years...It’s easy to think that if there was a stricter OSHA silica standard in place when I worked in the foundry, I might not be sick. You’re absolutely right.”

Alan White, foundry worker, testimony at OSHA hearing on a proposed silica standard, March 31, 2014

“Gilbert Banuelos... gasps for air during the smallest chores. A few minutes of plucking weeds from the garden or sweeping the back patio knocks him into a chair. If he’s not careful, it can knock him unconscious... Gilbert Banuelos’ lungs are riddled with scars from silicosis. The Banuelos are waiting to hear if he is a candidate for a lung transplant. Every year it gets harder and harder to breath.

Silica Poses Health Risk for Oil & Gas Workers, Technology Responds,” Rocky Mountain PBS I-News, Sept. 1, 2015

After several months on a job where he was exposed to large concentrations of silica dust, bricklayer Chris Johnson “was short of breath, losing weight rapidly, unable to do simple tasks without exertion. ‘I had no clue what was going on.’”

“... At age 40, he is living with severely compromised lungs which cannot be repaired, or treated with radiation or medicine. A person in Johnson’s condition, doctors say, can expect to live until about age 45.”

“Unequal Risk: Slow Motion Tragedy for American Workers,” Center For Public Integrity.