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LABOR DEPARTMENT SETS FINAL JOB HEALTH RULE ON VINYL CHLORIDE

CHICAGO -- Assistant Secretary of Labor John H. Stender announced today final job health rules that will establish a three-phase program for reducing worker exposure to vinyl chloride, a cancer-causing chemical widely used in the manufacture of plastics.

Stender, head of the Department's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), said the rule, effective Oct. 4, will ultimately lower exposure to the chemical "to levels that will protect worker health by cutting significantly the amount of vinyl chloride they are exposed to."

In its three-phase progression between Oct. 4, this year and Jan. 1, 1976, the new standard will reduce the 50 parts per million (ppm) in air exposure to vinyl chloride now permitted to as low as one ppm averaged over any eight-hour period and five ppm averaged over any period no longer than 15 minutes.

Vinyl chloride, a gaseous chemical, has been shown to induce cancer of the liver (angiosarcoma) in workers in the United States and other countries.

Its effects first became widely known last January when the B. F. Goodrich Company reported deaths of several of its employees exposed to the chemical. Exhaustive investigation and lengthy public hearings followed.

OSHA first held an emergency fact-finding hearing in February, then conducted a survey of vinyl chloride and polyvinyl chloride plants in the South. Meanwhile, more deaths and illnesses were reported.

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An emergency temporary rule substantially lowering the exposure levels from 500 ppm in air to 50 ppm was issued April 5.

Under the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, the emergency standard would have expired Oct. 5.

Stender told a news conference in Chicago, where he is attending the National Safety Congress, that the permanent standard will continue in effect at the 50 ppm level at the outset.

"We will continue at that level until Dec. 31," Stender said, "to give employers a reasonable time to accomplish changes in their plants that will permit them to reduce exposures or provide employee protective equipment."

He said that on Jan. 1, 1975, employers must reduce levels to one ppm averaged over any eight-hour period, and five ppm averaged over any period no longer than 15 minutes.

Reduction of exposures to at or below these levels will be made through feasible engineering and work practice controls. Where these measures will not reduce levels enough, the rules will permit reductions to the lowest practicable level with employee respiratory protection provided to meet the one ppm and five ppm exposure limits, Stender said.

Beginning Jan. 1, 1976 -- the third phase -- wearing of respirators will be mandatory for workers exposed to levels greater than the one ppm and five ppm allowable limits. Until that date, wearing of respirators is discretionary for exposures no greater than 25 ppm.

Plans for reducing exposure to the permissible levels must be available on request of OSHA.

Before giving details of the new rules, Stender praised the "splendid cooperation" of the medical and scientific community, labor and industry representatives, and officials of other government agencies who "provided the Labor Department with a comprehensive record on which to base its final ruling."

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Vinyl chloride, polyvinyl chloride (PVC) and PVC-product manufacturing processes often release vinyl chloride into workplace atmospheres. The new rules will protect workers' health against exposures to significant amounts of vinyl chloride during these processes, Stender said.

The new rules will apply to the manufacture, reaction, packaging, repackaging, transportation, storage, handling or use of vinyl chloride or polyvinyl chloride. They will not apply to the handling or use of products made of polyvinyl chloride.

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