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U.S. Considers 2-Level Limit On Asbestos

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WASHINGTON—The Labor Department is considering proposing two levels of tougher limits on occupational exposure to asbestos, which has been linked to cancer and respiratory disease.

The department is weighing proposing two levels because of the varying degrees of danger from different forms of asbestos and doubts about the ability of all employers to meet a strict standard. One level would set the maximum workplace exposure for asbestos at 500,000 fibers per cubic meter of air and another at 200,000 fibers per cubic meter of air. The current level is two million fibers per cubic meter.

Asbestos comes in different fiber types, and some scientists suspect some types may be more likely than others to cause mesothelioma, a cancer of the lining of the lungs. Scientists at the department's Occupational Safety and Health Administration also are unsure whether all employers could measure minute air concentrations of asbestos, which would be necessary if only the stricter 200,000-fiber level is set.

Establishing different exposure limits "is certainly something that's under consideration," said Gary Stroebel, a top OSHA official. He emphasized that a proposal for a new standard, likely in a week at the earliest, will "say, 'We're still undecided in the area.' " Whether there should be more than one exposure level is a question that will "be raised in the proposal," he said.

Mr. Stroebel noted that England already sets different exposure limits for asbestos, depending on the fiber form.

OSHA's effort to propose a new permanent standard for asbestos comes on the heels of a court defeat earlier this month for its temporary tougher limit on occupational exposure. The suit was brought by the asbestos industry. The emergency standard, issued Nov. 4, had lowered the limit to 500,000 fibers per cubic meter of air. Unions wanted the limit reduced to 100,000 fibers per cubic meter.

The coming asbestos action is one of four stricter health standards expected to be issued in final form by the end of the year, said Thorne Auchter, the job-safety agency's departing chief. The other substances involved are benzene, used in making chemical products; ethylene oxide, a sterilizing agent used in hospitals; and ethylene dibromide, a widely used grain and fruit fumigant already restricted by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Mr. Auchter, who leaves tomorrow to return to private industry, said he expects Labor Secretary Raymond Donovan to "take a look at" a benzene proposal next week. If he approves it, OSHA also must win White House Budget Office approval before proposing the new rule. Last June, Mr. Auchter promised the Public Citizen Health Research Group a toughened benzene standard by this June. OSHA is expected to propose one part benzene per million parts of air, down from the current 10 parts per million.

The agency already has proposals pending for tougher limits for ethylene oxide and ethylene dibromide.

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