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New Rules on Worker Exposure to Lead, Toluene, Asbestos Offered by Labor Unit

By a WALL STREET JOURNAL Staff Reporter

WASHINGTON—The Labor Department proposed new and revised job health standards limiting worker exposure to three widely used industrial substances and setting procedures for handling 11 other toxic chemicals.

The new standards cut in half the permissible exposure to lead and toluene, an industrial chemical, and reduce by 90% the amount of asbestos fibers permitted in the air at work places.

Existing exposure limits for the other toxic chemicals weren't changed.

Officials estimated that 100,000 workers nationwide are potentially exposed to toluene, a colorless, volatile substance used primarily in producing benzene, solvents and gasoline. Workers in the petrochemical, paint, rubber, shipbuilding, construction and auto industries can be exposed to the chemical.

Thousands of other workers may be exposed to lead in more than 120 occupations, including the making and reclaiming of lead storage batteries, lead smelting, glass works, printing, painting and construction work.

Toluene can irritate and burn skin, damage the eyes and the central nervous system, and could cause death from very high exposures, federal safety and health officials said. Lead exposure can damage the brain and nervous system and can cause kidney ailments, seizures and other ailments.

An estimated 50,000 workers are involved in manufacture of products containing asbestos. The department issued its first standard controlling asbestos, which can cause lung cancer and other serious illnesses, in mid-1972.

Used in Solvents, Chemicals

The other materials for which new work standards were proposed are used primarily as solvents and in chemical processing to make plastics, plasticizers, rubber, surface coatings, and in printing. Exposures to these chemicals can produce skin problems and respiratory damage and affect the central nervous system.

The 11 chemicals include p-tert-butyl-toluene, a solvent; cumene, a chemical raw material; ethyl benzene, used to produce styrene; alpha-methyl styrene, used to produce chemicals and drugs; styrene, used to make synthetic rubber and plastic; vinyl toluene, used in making resins; cyclohexane a solvent; camphor, used in making plastics; mesityl oxide, a solvent; 5-methyl-3-heptanone, a solvent and ozone, used in water and waste treatment.

The new proposed standards will appear soon in the Federal Register. Before they become final, the Labor Department will review public comments on them, environmental and inflationary impact statements, and may hold public hearings.

Standards Tightened

The lead standard reduces the permissible exposure of workers to 100 micrograms of lead in each cubic meter of air, averaged over eight hours. The existing standard is 200 micrograms. Employers in industries using lead, inorganic lead compounds or organic lead salts initially would be required to determine whether employee exposures exceed an "action level" of 50 micrograms in each cubic meter of air. Exposures above that level would require employers to regularly measure lead exposures and to notify workers of the results.

At exposures above the 100-microgram level, employers first would have to use all

exposures. Respirators could be used only where engineering controls and work-practice measures don't reduce exposures to the 100-microgram limit.

The standard also sets a maximum standard for lead in the blood of 60 micrograms per 100 grams of blood. Workers' blood or urine would have to be tested periodically.

The department said health problems from lead exposure have been recognized since the early 1800s. More than one million tons of lead are used annually in the U.S.

Levels of Toluene

The toluene standard sets an "action level" of 50 parts a million in air, which would trigger a monitoring program. Worker exposures would be limited to 100 parts a million in air, over eight hours. The current limit is 200 parts a million. The standard also sets a new ceiling limit of 200 parts a million during any 15-minute period, and would prohibit skin or eye exposure to toluene liquid.

The standard also first requires employers to use feasible engineering controls to reduce exposures to workers, permitting use of respirators where such controls aren't feasible or don't reduce exposures to the 100 parts a million limit.

Industry groups often oppose such a requirement, arguing that it is a waste of money to require expensive engineering controls that don't reduce exposures to the permissible limits and still require workers to use respirators.

More than one billion gallons of toluene are produced annually in the U.S.

Under the new standards for the 11 other toxic substances, employers would be required to monitor exposures regularly when they exceed half of the existing permissible exposure level. Above the level, the rules require engineering controls, setting up a medical surveillance program, and other work-practice measures.

Approval Is Expressed

One leading job-safety and health expert expressed tentative approval of the proposed standards for lead, toluene and asbestos. Louis Beliczky, health and safety director of the United Rubber Workers and at times critic of federal job-safety policy, said "these three standards seem to be reasonable and justified."

The revised asbestos standard allows workers to be exposed to an average of 0.5 fiber a cubic centimeter of air over any eight-hour period instead of the present limit of five fibers a cubic centimeter of air. The standard defines a fiber as a particle of asbestos longer than five micrometers.

A worker couldn't be exposed to more than five fibers a cubic centimeter of air over any 15-minute period.

The new levels also are more stringent than a previously planned additional standard that would have cut exposure limits beginning next year to two fibers a cubic centimeter of air, averaged over eight hours.

The proposal also would require employers to retain employee medical records for 40 years, or for the duration of an employee's career plus 20 years. Currently, asbestos regulations require that some records be kept for only three years and others for 20 years.

The tighter rules for asbestos exposure wouldn't apply to the construction industry, which would operate under present standards until a special set of revisions for that industry is developed. The department said workers could be exposed to asbestos on jobs in construction, shipbuilding, auto manufacturing, auto repair, asbestos products