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DRILLING SPECIALTIES COMPANY
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September 10, 1981

Asbestos-Const-Std

Sh-96-81

Mr. Thorne Auchter
Assistant Secretary for Occupational
Safety and Health
Department of Labor
200 Constitution Avenue, N.W.
Room S2315
Washington, D.C. 20210

Dear Mr. Auchter:

Since the early 1960's, asbestos fiber (chrysotile) has been used as an additive to oil well drilling muds. The major reason for its use in this application is that it allows wells to be drilled faster and more economically. Today, in light of our energy crisis, the increasing price of oil and the unfavorable balance of trade caused in part by large imports of foreign oil, the need for effective drilling mud additives has become even more important.

Yet, the continued use of asbestos in this important application is jeopardized by a single, overly-broad asbestos standard. The current OSHA asbestos standard (29 CFR 1910.1001) is apparently tailored to worker protection at the more traditional, enclosed and fixed worksites where potential exposures are greater than at drilling sites.

Drilling Specialties Company has been mindful of the health and safety of workers using drilling mud asbestos (DMA). Accordingly, and guided by OSHA Standard 1910.1001 (c)(2) (which recognizes wetting as an acceptable method of controlling asbestos dust), Drilling Specialties has previously developed a method of formulating its product (Flosal® DMA) with water, so that the release of any asbestos fibers is greatly reduced. The success of this method has been evaluated by on-site monitoring for asbestos fibers at numerous drilling sites where Flosal® DMA was being used. Filters from these tests were sent to an independent laboratory for counting. The results of this monitoring showed that exposures to airborne asbestos during the use of Flosal® DMA were consistently below the OSHA mandated PEL of 2 f/cc and, in fact, did not exceed 0.1 f/cc on an 8-hr time-weighted average (TWA).

Although there are no suitable substitutes for asbestos in many drilling mud formulations, many drilling contractors and operators are reluctant to use any asbestos fiber because they are afraid of being cited for not complying with the OSHA asbestos standard. Because of the transient nature of the work force, the relatively short time spent at each drilling location and the low potential exposures, the medical examinations, monitoring and record-keeping requirements in the OSHA asbestos standard are unnecessary and impractical, if not impossible.

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Although OSHA Instruction CPL 2-2.21A (issued February 18, 1981) indicates that under OSHA's current enforcement policy, employers will not be cited for a serious violation if medical examinations are not provided to employees whose exposures to airborne asbestos fiber counts are below 0.1 fibers/cc on a seven to eight-hour TWA, a condition which we believe can be met when using Flosal® DMA in accordance with proper work practices, many employers fear using any drilling mud asbestos unless OSHA will specifically clarify this situation as it pertains to them. This is particularly true in light of recent Review Commission decisions which broadly apply, to an extreme extent, the medical examination and monitoring requirements of the existing asbestos standard. Research-Cottrell, Inc., OSHRC Docket No. 11756, 1981 CCH OSHD Paragraph 25,284 (March 31, 1981); Anaconda Aluminum Co., OSHRC Docket No. 13102, 1981 CCH OSHD Paragraph 25,300 at 31,350-351 (March 31, 1981) (wilful citation sustained). In light of these decisions, employers using any asbestos (even in drilling mud) are understandably fearful that unless, as a minimum, clarification and revision of the medical examination and monitoring requirements of the asbestos standard occur, they will continue to have an unacceptable OSHA compliance risk by virtue of such asbestos use.

As concerns drilling muds, we believe that absent substantial amendment of the existing asbestos standard, the best way in which the foregoing needed clarification and revision could be accomplished would be by the promulgation of a separate standard governing asbestos in the construction industry and at other non-fixed worksites. We understand that OSHA will be reviewing the current asbestos standard within the near future, and that the Asbestos Information Association has provided OSHA with a suggested non-fixed worksite asbestos standard. We urge immediate consideration of this approach. Pending adoption of such a separate standard by OSHA, we believe that some relief would be afforded by the issuance of an additional OSHA Compliance Instruction stating that for non-fixed worksites, such as in drilling operations and construction projects, if representative monitoring combined with carefully-designed and observed work practices indicates exposures are normally below 0.1 fibers/cc, then medical examinations, record keeping and repeat monitoring would not be necessary. This approach would be in accordance with the recommendation of the OSHA/NIOSH task force of January 2, 1981 "that compliance with work practices which are shown to prevent worker overexposure be acceptable in lieu of exposure monitoring."

The use of a work practice program has been endorsed by OSHA and NIOSH as an alternative to approaches mandated by the current OSHA asbestos standard, an alternative which would appear to have particular application to non-fixed worksites. We in the drilling industry believe that the work practice approach offers significant potential rewards for the nation as well as those directly involved in finding and producing energy. Accordingly, in addition to our other recommendations, we are eager to work with OSHA in instituting and substantiating the effectiveness of a work practice program for asbestos use in the drilling industry.

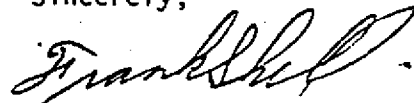
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As indicated, we urge your immediate consideration of the concerns and suggested approaches outlined above. We stand ready to assist the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in helping to protect workers using drilling mud asbestos, while at the same time eliminating unnecessary requirements that are not justified from the standpoint of eliminating a significant risk nor doing so from a cost-effective standpoint.

Please let us know your response to this approach.

Sincerely,



F. J. Shell
Manager, Technical Services

bcc: B. J. Pigg ✓
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