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From: Rury
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Beaumont

Government slashes asl

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Labor Department, saying 375,000 workers face "grave danger," issued an emergency standard Wednesday that slashes by 75 percent the permissible exposure to asbestos fibers by employees in the manufacturing, construction and maritime industries.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration put out an Emergency Temporary Standard — the first of the Reagan administration — lowering the legal asbestos exposure level over an eight-hour day from two fibers per cubic centimeter of air to one-half fiber.

The rule is enforceable immediately upon publication in the Federal

Register. Spokesman Douglas Clark said the agency hoped that would be Friday.

In announcing the action, Labor Secretary Raymond Donovan said the job safety agency's risk assessment predicts "three excess cancer deaths per 1,000 workers exposed for one year at the current permissible exposure level." Those risk studies also showed "risk of grave danger" to people who have even short-term asbestos exposure.

The mortality rate is an extraordinary 53 times higher for smokers who are exposed to asbestos, the agency said.

Such studies indicate that lowering

the asbestos level to one-half fiber per cubic centimeter of air will "save many lives," the agency said.

Asbestos is a fibrous mineral widely used as a fire retardant insulation in buildings and reinforcement in concrete pipes. It has been shown to cause cancer and debilitating lung diseases.

Unions representing workers in construction and manufacturing industries had been pressing the administration to take such emergency action. An asbestos health standard has been on the books since 1972, not long after the Occupational Safety and Health Administration was created, but has remained unchanged since

Asbestos exposure levels

1976.

Under government rulemaking procedures, OSHA must propose a permanent asbestos standard and seek public comment on it within 60 days of publication of the emergency rule.

OSHA administrator Thorne G. Auchter had said last April that he was speeding up his agency's work on tightening the existing asbestos standard. In a letter to Sheldon Samuels, director of health and safety at the AFL-CIO's Industrial Union Department, Auchter said, "Personally, I am very concerned about the asbestos problem."

He said at the time that OSHA planned to issue new rules by June

1984.

Three large asbestos firms — Manville Corp., UNR Industries Inc. and Amatek Corp. — have filed for bankruptcy law protection in the face of thousands of lawsuits by former workers who allege they contracted respiratory problems as a result of their jobs.

The OSHA move was spurred in part by increasing concern about the exposure of construction industry workers to asbestos at work sites where buildings are being demolished. The agency had said in October that it was stepping up government inspections of these work sites.

The emergency standard covers manufacturing, construction and maritime industries and its provisions include requirements that employers train their workers in the handling of asbestos.

The standard accords wide flexibility as to how companies achieve the lower exposure levels. The methods include removing fibers from work-place sites with suction-type equipment, revamping work practices and furnishing respirators to workers.

That may not sit well with the unions, who argue that strict engineering controls are the best solution to the problem.

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