

U.S. Weighs Tougher Curbs on Exposure To ~~Asbestos~~ and Benzene in the Workplace

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WASHINGTON—The federal government is considering imposing stricter limits on occupational exposure to two deadly substances, asbestos and benzene.

The moves, growing out of intense pressure by unions and scientific groups, would represent a sharp departure from the Reagan administration's emphasis on reducing costly government regulation.

The Labor Department is looking at setting a maximum workplace exposure limit for asbestos of 500,000 fibers for each cubic meter of air. The current level, set in 1972, is two million fibers a cubic meter.

"In my personal opinion, it (the new limit) might go lower" than 500,000, said John Martonik, deputy director of health standards for the department's Occupational Safety and Health Administration. In an interview, many scientists contend the limit should be reduced to 100,000 fibers a cubic meter of air. Mr. Martonik said it isn't clear yet whether a limit that low is attainable and accurately measurable.

At the same time OSHA chief Thorne Auchter promised quick consideration of tougher exposure levels for benzene. He made the commitment in a letter to the Public Citizen Health Research Group, run by Ralph Nader. The group, along with six unions and the American Public Health Association, petitioned OSHA in April for a temporary emergency standard to further limit workers' benzene exposure.

Mr. Auchter said he hasn't ruled on that petition yet. But meanwhile, his letter noted, he would hasten regular rule-making procedures. "We have decided to issue, on an expedited basis, a permanent (new) standard by June 1984," his letter noted. "We share the concern that benzene has the capacity to pose a very serious risk to workers."

Action in 1978

In 1978, the job-safety agency tightened its benzene rules after receiving evidence linking high exposure levels to leukemia. The rules reduced allowable exposure to one part benzene for each million parts air from 10 parts a million, the previous standard.

But in 1980, the Supreme Court threw out the tougher standard, saying OSHA had failed to establish first that it would remedy a "significant risk of material health impairment." Until now, the agency hasn't attempted to reexamine the benzene rule using the court's 1980 guidelines.

An estimated 600,000 workers are exposed to benzene. About 35,000 are exposed at levels greater than one part a million, where the consumer health group thinks the standard should be placed. That level, an even lower one of 0.5 part a million and others will be examined, Mr. Auchter said in his letter. He indicated a new benzene standard would be proposed by November.

Benzene is used frequently as an intermediate chemical in the manufacture of plastics, as well as an ingredient in solvents such as paint remover.

Meanwhile, tougher exposure limits for asbestos are likely to be proposed by later this summer, Mr. Martonik said, and a new rule could be issued by fall. The agency earlier had said it planned to revise the asbestos standard by September 1985. He said the speedup partly reflects new scientific evidence linking exposure at low levels to asbestosis, a lung disease, and mesothelioma, a cancer of the lining of the lungs. OSHA has estimated 1.4 million workers have been exposed to asbestos, once used widely in producing ships, floor tiles, brake linings and roof coatings.

Builders' Requirements

In 1975, the agency suggested lowering the asbestos standard to 500,000 fibers a cubic meter of air, but it never acted on the proposal. The proposal excluded the construction industry. That industry will be included in any new lower limits, Mr. Martonik said. However, he noted, OSHA also is considering modifying builders' compliance requirements to make sure they're appropriate to the industry. Such alterations might mollify certain employers' objections to tougher exposure levels.

OSHA's attempt to reduce worker exposure to benzene and asbestos mightn't please the White House. The Office of Management and Budget recently tried unsuccessfully to block the job-safety agency from continuing to require engineering controls to reduce textile workers' exposure to cotton dust. Budget-office officials contended that other methods would be less costly.

Also, some unions aren't entirely happy with OSHA's action on the two hazardous chemicals. They want the agency to step up its enforcement efforts while the current standards are being strengthened. Otherwise, "millions of workers will be exposed unnecessarily" to the substances, said Sheldon Samuels, health, safety and environment director for the AFL-CIO's Industrial Union Department.

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